The future of electronic entertainment issue#141

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PLAYSTATION2 I XBOX I GAMECUBE I PC I GBA

Previewed: Splinter Cell
Pariah, GTA: San Andre
Lego Star Wars, Golden
Reviewed: Burnout 3, Do
The Sims 2, Tales Of Sym
Second Sight, DJ: Decks
Plus: The indie shooter
EA/Criterion – a special
The science of serious g

TM

Combat evolved (again):
Bungie aims for eleven out of ten





One of the true signs of a game's classic status is surely its longevity. *Super Mario Kart* had it, as did *Street Fighter II* and *GoldenEye*, all three titles providing Nintendo owners with hour upon hour, week upon week and month upon month of continuous entertainment. And then there's *Halo*, whose ability to ignite the passions of a roomful (sometimes *houseful*, thanks to Xbox's System Link) of people today remains as strong as it did back in 2002 when it debuted on Microsoft's console hardware.

Multiplayer Xbox *Halo* is a cult, although to call it that seems to undersell the size of its band of followers. It is more an institution, an acutely contemporary one, today's equivalent of what our younger selves once sweated and swore over, fearing at the time that such all-encompassingly engrossing things might never appear again.

And so to the sequel, upon which similar fears have been focused by millions of gamers. This month we visited Bungie's Seattle HQ and found a company attempting not only to meet expectations but exceed them. We wanted to return with an article detailing every nook and cranny of *Halo 2*, but Bungie was not about to play its hand that way. Instead, demonstrating a unique approach, the developer wants you to discover everything about the story and singleplayer campaign for yourself. You'll be able to do so on November 11 (or just before on import). In the meantime, read about the things we *were* able to uncover on p48.

As usual, there's plenty more to consume this month, too. Along with a look at the underground shooter scene (see p68) there are reports from Ubisoft's facility in Montreal (p56), Blizzard's studios in Irvine (p78) and Traveller's Tales' offices in Liverpool (p60). Each developer is working on something genuinely provocative, and they're all, fortunately, willing to spill about their endeavours.

(Oh, and if *Halo* has a resonance with you as an **Edge** reader, so should next month's cover game. Look out for it. It should be interesting.)



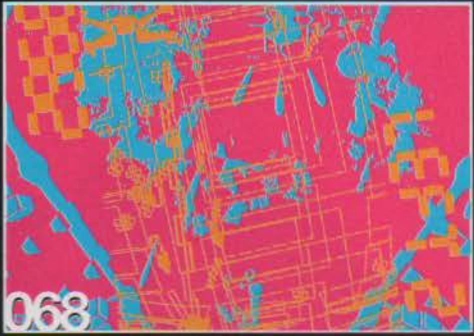
Features













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the 'where can you go from there?' issue





















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Has EA become too big to play?

With its takeover of Criterion, EA has become more than just the most dominant game publisher in the world: it has outgrown the entire industry. So what happens now?



David Lau-Kee has reason to smile. Already reaping Criterion's rewards, the new EA deal is unlikely to have made him any poorer

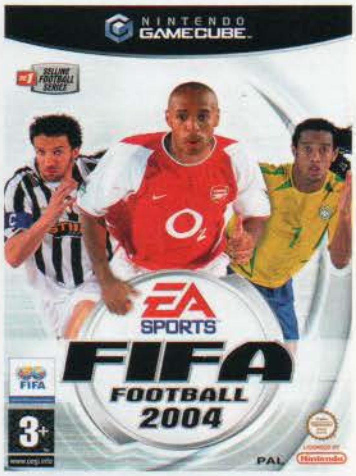
In some ways, it's hard to explain the significance of EA's acquisition of UK developer and middleware provider Criterion. The headline 'Large publisher buys partner studio' – Criterion's racer *Burnout 3* is one of EA's big hopes for the autumn – is not an exciting prospect. But for those of a strategic bent, the importance of the deal boils down to RenderWare, Criterion's suite of game development tools.

Yet this isn't a deal about EA's acceptance of middleware. The publisher's various studios have used RenderWare on key sport brands, such as *Madden NFL Football*, in the past. It's not even a deal about the boost the highly optimised RenderWare 4 can provide EA with respect to next-generation games consoles. Instead, the crux of the matter is much broader. Like a skilled player of the Japanese game go, in which the spaces matter rather than the counters, EA's move for Criterion isn't about the move itself, it's about the consequence of the move for other players. Or, put another way, the deal isn't about what Criterion can do for EA, but what Criterion can't now do for the rest of the videogame industry.

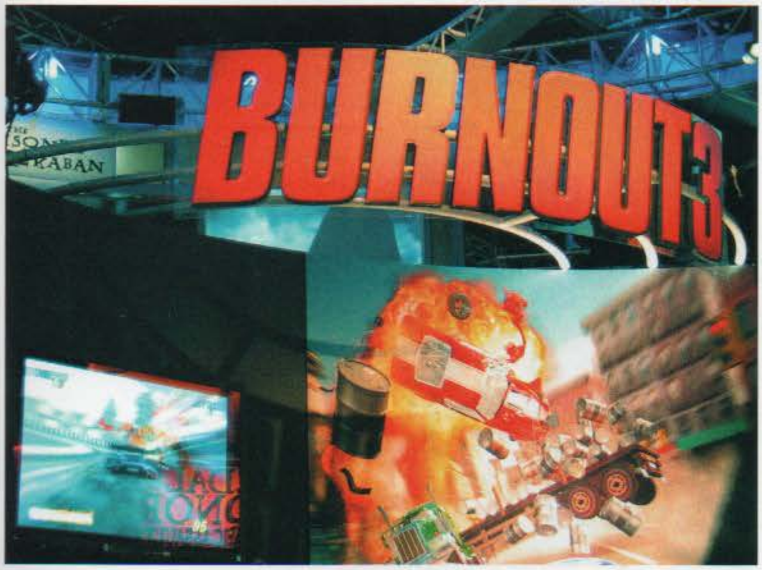
At least that's the perception among many. With RenderWare locked into the development pipeline of some hugely profitable franchises such as Rockstar's *GTA*, Activision's *Tony Hawk's* skating games and Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer*, the problem for publishers is that these titles are now dependent on intellectual property owned by their biggest rival. In a sense, their ongoing success is now dependent on EA's largesse.

"Now I have the freedom to plunder from the EA store of tools and libraries to add to RenderWare, the middleware playing field remains level"





EA enjoys massive success in the online and sports spaces – and it's combining the two



The success of EA's involvement with *Burnout 3* is revealed on page 100. While some may mourn the introduction of a brash American vocabulary, it's almost certain to outsell its predecessors

The fightback starts here

It's an assertion Criterion's CEO **David Lau-Kee** totally rejects. "There's no way I would have entertained the deal if it would have substantially changed our goals," he says. "We always have, and we always will, provide precisely the same technology internally as we provide externally. That won't change because we are part of EA. In fact, now I have the freedom to plunder from the EA store of tools and libraries to add to RenderWare, the middleware playing field remains level."

Bruce McMillan, EA's executive vice president and group studio head, is also firm in allaying conspiracy theorists. "Criterion's middleware is used in roughly 25 per cent of all games in development," he says. "I believe, in future, the combination of EA's tools and RenderWare will be a compelling solution for other developers, and they'll want continued access."

Handled in the right way, it's true that RenderWare backed by EA's production experience could further accelerate the acceptance of middleware. Certainly EA is looking to increase its own reliance. "Buying Criterion fits our core strategy for aligning our worldwide studio operation behind a common technology framework," McMillan says, explaining one of the reasons behind the acquisition.

And perhaps this is the real significance of the deal. Other publishers have placed similar faith in RenderWare – Infogrames being a particularly enthusiastic user across its European and US operations, for example. But only EA seems to possess the strategic vision to look beyond the obvious benefits. Taking it at its word, by owning Criterion it can make RenderWare better, improve its internal efficiencies and generate cashflow by licensing the results to other companies.

For Lau-Kee, it was this leadership attitude that proved to be the dealmaker. "The nature of a company such as Criterion means we've received almost continual offers," he reveals. "Having worked closely



For many, EA's Harry Potter games crystalise everything they mistrust about the company – so-so titles which dominate the charts on the basis of valuable licences and extravagant marketing

The Madden method

Celebrating its 15th anniversary, *Madden NFL Football* is a classic case study of the EA mentality at work. First released for the Apple II in 1989, *John Madden Football* actually boasted an inauspicious start. Two years late in development, early focus testing suggested the title *Electronic Arts Football* would be more popular. However, having signed up the chief NFL coach and commentator John Madden, EA took the decision to go with its original title. There wasn't even a plan for sequel, although one was quickly concocted after early success. A new version of the game has been released every year since.

The annual refresh, in part carried out to ensure the game remained up-to-date with respect to players and teams, also had the commercial benefit of locking consumers into a year-on-year sales pattern. The inclusion of the year in each title means the current game version is clear to casual buyers as well. Interestingly, however, this marketing ploy only started in 1993 with *Madden NFL 94*, when EA first signed a deal to use the NFL licence. This also proved to be the springboard for the company to unleash its first TV ads. With total sales topping 35million units and annual sales now around the five-million mark, *Madden* proved to be the perfect testing ground for EA's dominance of the sports genre. Regular refreshes, the use of official licences, player tie-ins and TV advertising are now seen as the norm within EA Sports games as well as the competition.



with EA, it has become increasingly clear that we are thinking about solving the same problems. Because of its size, EA has to think strategically about what's going to happen in five years' time, exactly as we have to as a technology provider."

So, if you believe the noises coming from both EA and Criterion, the result is a deal that's good for EA, Criterion and the entire games industry. There is another point of view, though, that says this deal marks the point at which EA's position within the industry subtly changes. Previously just the biggest thirdparty publisher, other publishers would at least go through the motions of talking about competing with EA. Now, however, EA's dominance, combined with its own middleware solution, potentially makes it even more powerful than console manufacturers such as Sony and Microsoft.

Its refusal to publish games for Sega's Dreamcast doomed the console in the eyes of many outside Japan. Its clout was also revealed by Nintendo's decision to reduce the licence fee it requires publishers to pay in order to release GameCube titles when EA made noises about scaling back support. Instead of a typical $7 per disc, it's believed EA's preferential rate is around the $2 mark. EA still pays the standard rate for Xbox and PS2 disks – one reason it is often joked that EA makes more money for Sony than Sony does. The question remains: is such dominance good for the industry?

EA's rise to power

It's hard to imagine now, but EA hasn't always been the biggest and best. Back in the mid-'90s, an ambitious outfit called Acclaim ruled the roost. With revenues of over $500 million in 1995 and game franchises such as *Mortal Kombat*, *WWF* and *NBA Jam*, it seemed unstoppable. As often happens in the industry, the wheels fell off a year later. As EA's revenue hit $600 million, Acclaim's slumped to under $200 million. More than just a cheap morality tale, such rollercoaster behaviour has been typical of the industry. Success has seldom been turned into long-term growth.

But while others have risen and fallen, EA has sailed through, growing almost year on year. Its trick has been a laser-like concentration on licensing and the best distribution in the business and a marketing department that doesn't confuse its customers. Amazingly, it was also the first publisher to get a handle on meeting release deadlines. According to **Bing Gordon**, the company's long-time chief marketeer, the rule of thumb is that a fixed release date will increase sales by 30 per cent. "When customers say: 'I'll buy it later', it means never," he states bluntly.

Combined with the concept of regular sequels – preferably yearly for any sports games – it has revolutionised the retail channel. And in such respects, to date, EA's success has been great for the videogame industry. It's forced other publishers to get professional and focus on issues such as meeting deadlines and having effective distribution and marketing systems.

"EA really focuses on its point-of-sale activity," says one executive in an up-and-coming publisher. "When I was last in the US, I took our office manager out to Target. I stood him ten feet from the shelf and asked him to point out the games that stood out. Every single game he pointed out was either EA Games or EA Sports, with the exception of *Vice City*."

EA in charge

One lesson EA brought into play was the value of celebrity branding. Its first chart-topping game was *Chuck Yeager Flight Trainer*. It's built the *Madden* brand of American football games into the most successful US franchise ever (see 'The Madden method') and applied the lessons learned from that game's 15 successive yearly releases to build EA Sports into the dominant brand – the label is said to own over two thirds of the entire sport-based games market.

It's this sort of monopoly position that worries people. Such is EA's stranglehold on the sports genre that no other companies can compete. Even Microsoft and Sony have decided to drop their football, basketball and hockey releases this year, leaving only Sega's ESPN-licensed games. Interestingly, Sega's NFL game, outsold last year ten to one by *Madden*, has been released at budget price point. And the squeeze is spreading. In the racing genre, EA blasted into the top spot in 2003 thanks



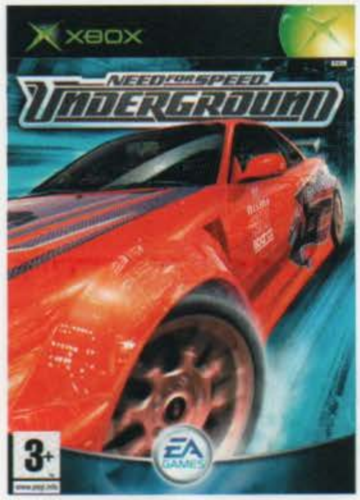


To many, the *Tiger Woods* series is now another must-have yearly update in the EA Sports roster. Meanwhile, EA Games has extended its licence to work with Bond properties until the year 2010









It may maximise the potential of brands like LOTR and Def Jam, but EA's own IPs, such as *The Sims* and *NFS*, sell many more copies

to the five-million-plus success of *Need For Speed: Underground*. This year's sequel, combined with the potential of *Burnout 3* – a franchise made a success by Acclaim before EA muscled onto the scene, let's not forget – is already setting alarm bells ringing. Even titles that would have been previously unassailable such as *Gran Turismo 4* are under pressure, let alone ones such as Acclaim's *Juiced* and Eidos' *Crash 'n' Burn*.

The result has been a move to extremes, notably the sort of mature games from which EA has traditionally shied away. One proponent is Midway. Previously with a core of well-respected sports games, it's now reinventing itself under the direction of ex-Playboy CEO David Zucker. Looking at the industry with a fresh set of eyes, he's stated that the company's new focus will be M-rated games, a philosophy backed up with the release of *The Suffering* and which will be extended with games such as *Narc*, *Area 51*, *Mortal Kombat*, and the *Unreal* series. Take Two's Rockstar label, behind games such as *GTA: Vice City*, *State Of Emergency* and *Manhunt*, was set up for much the same reasons.

A more subtle result of this attitude will be seen during the second half of the year. Because of production issues, blockbusters such as *Doom 3*, *Half-Life 2*, *Halo 2*, *Metroid Prime 2* and *Killzone*, none of which are from EA, are competing with each other within the FPS genre, as well as trying not to be pushed out by *GTA: San Andreas*. The likely result is that few will meet sales targets.

It's perhaps in this light that the most fundamental anti-EA feeling will become evident. With notable exceptions, it doesn't make the sort of games that are listed in critics' top 100s of all time. For all the money EA's made from the James Bond licence – a deal now extended to 2010 – it's never made one to touch Rare's *GoldenEye*. European football fans still prefer Konami's *Pro Evolution Soccer* to *FIFA*, despite the nonsense of not-quite-correct player names. Its biggest games of the last few years have been based on the IP of other industries – The Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter – while *Medal of Honor* is Saving Private Ryan by another name.

"If the whole industry gets bigger and becomes much more profitable, EA as the biggest player just gets a larger slice of a much bigger pie"

Yet, if Lau-Kee is to be believed, the bigger EA gets, the better it will be for the entire industry in the long run. "I've been surprised about how frank the senior EA guys are about their desire to make this a healthy industry for everyone," he says. "I almost hesitate to say it, but I think it makes sense to EA from an almost altruistic perspective. If the whole industry gets bigger and becomes much more profitable, EA as the biggest player just gets a larger slice of a much bigger pie."

In that respect, at least, the Criterion deal marks a point of change. Already too dominant in some ways, the effort EA puts into developing RenderWare and the openness with which it shares that knowledge will be closely watched. Competition is good, but the real deal now for EA is to look for opportunities outside the videogame industry.

As one of Xbox's creators, Seamus Blackley, has pointed out, unless publishers can create their own IP and outsource it to other media sectors, gaming will remain a secondary creative industry. Now would seem to be a good time for EA to accept the challenge.

EA: an accountant's dream

Even in the hyperbole of the gaming industry, EA's financial muscle is incredible. The first company to break the $1billion revenue barrier in the financial year ending 1999, the $2billion barrier followed in 2003. It missed the $3billion barrier in 2004 – a year in which it released 32 games, 27 of which sold over a million copies – by $43million. Compared to its nearest rival, Take Two, that's almost three times as large. Whereas in terms of its stock market capitalisation, a better indication of how moneymen view future prospects, its $14.5billion worth is ten times Take Two's valuation. But the really scary thing is its profitability. There's an oft-told story that EA makes more profit in its Christmas quarter than the rest of the industry makes in the rest of the year. Not quite true, but it usually does make more profit per year than the rest of the US and European publishers combined. In 2004, for example, it made $577million profit, compared to a combined total of Activision, Take Two and THQ of $212million. And the gap between it and its rivals is growing. Taking into account Take Two's dramatic rise on the back of *GTA: Vice City*, EA still managed to increase the ratio between its annual profits and that of its nearest competitor (which used to be Activision but is now Take Two). Unsurprisingly, it has more cash in the bank than it perhaps knows what to do with: $2.4billion at the last count.



Innovations like EA Trax, as featured in *SSX*, have bolstered EA's financial position and attracted the attention of the music industry

Sony hails handheld dawn in Japan

PlayStation Meeting 2004, which took place last month at the Shin Takanawa Prince Hotel in Shinagawa, saw existing hardware praised and the PSP format cued up



PlayStation Meeting 2004 was dominated by (what else?) PSP. Sony is looking to make the platform attractive to publishers and also emphasising its capacity for playing games

After a surprising tribute to Nintendo and its Famicom, Sony president **Ken Kutaragi** drew a parallel between Nintendo's successes and his own company's at PlayStation Meeting 2004. Both the PlayStation and PlayStation2 are about to join the Famicom and Super Famicom in the videogame hall of fame – PS1 has just reached the 100m units sold mark, while PS2 has sold 71m in just five years.

But the key message at the event was for the upcoming PSP launch ('Seeing is believing!'). PlayStation and PS2 succeeded in the same way as the Famicom and Super Famicom – by simply installing a console in as many homes as possible – and with PSP, Sony said that it wants to mimic Nintendo's Game Boy, by installing a console in everyone's pocket.

Kutaragi observed that hardware sales would keep slowing down as the PS2 market is saturated, with any serious recovery not occurring until PlayStation3 is released. While PSP should help Sony to buck this trend in the meantime, 2004 and 2005 will be dominated by software sales. Then it was time for Kutaragi to go into detail about the company's plans for its PS3 launch. The machine's design and the first technical demos should be revealed in Japan around March, followed by a much more detailed presentation during E3 in May, accompanied by a number of games.

The 2005 Tokyo Game Show, meanwhile, will benefit from a number of playable PS3 games in preparation for the console's release, which should be sometime around February or March 2006.

Only one thirdparty publisher, Koei, joined Sony on stage at the event, with a short demo of *Sengokumuso* on PSP. The prospect of playing over a 16player wi-fi network was a big one at the event.

Then came the PSP project no one was expecting: *Talkman*. Initially a translation program to help Japanese tourists overseas, Sony has added several features to make it enjoyable as a game. The simple interface features a bird that acts as your mentor, teacher and companion. Voice recognition is claimed to be excellent even without being trained, and it works in Japanese and English. Users select a situation, like the front lobby of a hotel, and the 'game' manages the situation as you interact with, and talk to, those around you – such as the hotel receptionist or lift attendant. A minigame has been added to test users' pronunciation by giving marks to each attempt. More options and modes will be revealed later.

A new PSP position

Sony has now stopped calling the PSP the 'Walkman of the 21st century', the official designation now being 'the portable PlayStation', emphasising it as a take-anywhere gaming device. Clearly the company wants to refocus the PSP as a console and not a media player.

Sony was keen to announce that, since E3 in May, the number of developers making games on PSP has jumped from 36 to 59

The company also released figures concerning its proposed UMD (universal media disc) format. UMDs will cost publishers ¥250 (£1.25) per unit (compared to DVDs at ¥200 (£1)) for single-layer discs and ¥300 (£1.50) for dual-layer, and Sony revealed that small orders will be accepted for production, allowing publishers to press just 1,000 copies at initial release and batches of 100 for repeats thereafter.



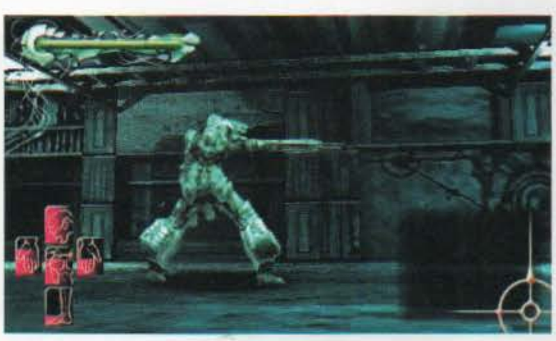
Sony's Ken Kutaragi was positive about PSP, despite what appears to be some caution in the Japanese gaming market

Sony was also keen to announce that, since E3 in May, the number of developers making games for the format has jumped from 36 to 59. The company also announced a 128bit copy protection system for games and movies on PSP, and revealed that an EyeToy-like camera should be available soon after launch, as well as a microphone-equipped headset.

No new information was offered concerning the machine's price or final release date, nor about its battery life. Several Japanese developers remain suspicious, convinced that PSP will be a costly proposition and, therefore, aimed at an adult audience with the money to buy it.

Square Enix has now been named as one of the companies working on the machine, although it has yet to show what it is planning, a sign that the company may be waiting to see how the platform performs before it commits.

Meanwhile, other Japanese developers remarked that the PSP hardware is not suited to children's small hands, while





Hudson's original PSP title, *Rengoku: The Tower Of Purgatory*, is a surprising departure from its usual effervescent fare. An action-RPG with 'dark and mature' themes, the only details released were that it would be available at PSP launch, and feature wireless networking

others are not happy with the D-pad, which is presenting the same problems as the original PlayStation joypad: it's simply uncomfortable when attempting beat 'em up-style manoeuvres. Moreover, the L and R buttons, which seem fragile, may yet need reworking.

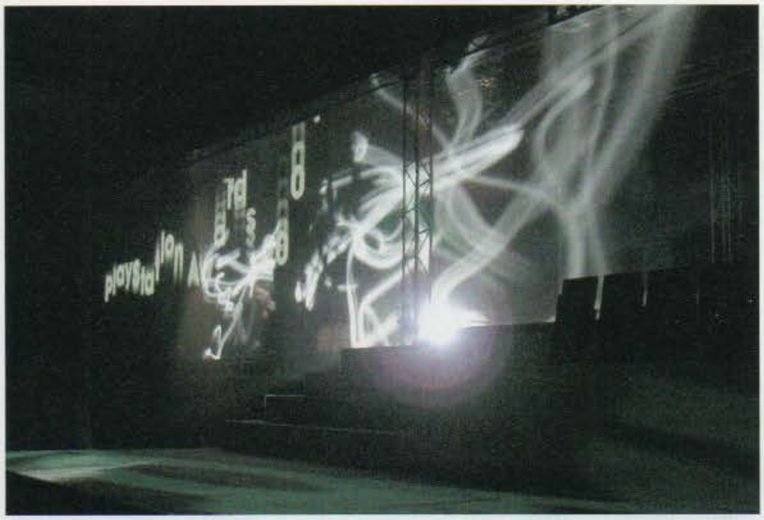
Sony had to have something tangible for the show, and it obliged with six playable PSP games. Most of these were still in the early stages of production, but they managed to deliver interesting experiences.

Unsurprisingly, the 2D games were closest to being finished, and Sega's *Puyo Puyo Fever* was the most impressive, with high-res graphics and smooth animation. Fighting game *Vampire Chronicle* (aka *Dark Stalkers*) from Capcom was suffering from the constraints of the uncomfortable D-pad, and its graphics lacked fluidity. As an early demo, though, there's hope for a much smoother 60fps when it's finished.

Dokodemo Issho, another outing for SCEI's feline mascot Toro, was a 3D game, but one with a 2D style. Like *Puyo Puyo*, it's already demonstrating crisp graphics. In terms of true 3D software, *Shin Sangokumuso* from Koei was the most impressive, with a good example of how to use the analogue 'trackpad' positioned below the PSP's D-pad, and the game provided a similar experience to the original PlayStation version.

Konami's *Metal Gear Acid* was, unsurprisingly for a Kojima title, displaying long cinematic and dialogue sequences, which made many showgoers talk about it in terms of being a 'digital manga'. It remains to be seen how the action phases will give the game more dynamism.

Meanwhile, From Software's *Armored Core Formula Front* (see p47) surprised many attendees, as it was not the mech action title everyone expected but a more thoughtful AI simulation game.







As you'd expect from a game of its ilk, Sega's *Puyo Puyo Fever* is a PSP title that doesn't have far to go before being complete. But how will launch software like this be received?

The Japanese launch line-up

It's clear that PSP game development is still at a very early stage, with only *Puyo Puyo Fever* advanced enough at the PlayStation Meeting to give any impression of how the hardware will perform as a gaming platform. The games will obviously evolve dramatically in the coming months, but the time-to-Japanese-launch clock is ticking, and it's difficult to see how certain titles will be radically overhauled throughout the remainder of their development schedule.

PlayStation Portable looks as if it will be lacking a truly stellar line-up at launch, although there could be surprises. Namco's handheld version of *Ridge Racer* has not yet been demoed, but it would significantly bolster the initial roster (and the software selection will obviously be seriously ramped up upon western release). Certainly, the prospect of *Ridge Racer* or *Winning Eleven* over a PSP wireless network is strong enough to suggest that Sony's portable-gaming debut should be successful in Japan, at least if these games arrive quickly enough.



***Armored Core* makes its debut on PSP with *Formula Front*. The series' profile in Japan should ensure it some attention**

On the topic of development, Sony also confirmed that PSP devkits have been delayed, leaving developers relying on emulation suites. The first version of the proper technology is expected to reach developers within weeks, however, and a performance analyser should be available for spring in 2005.

Clearly, with its attractive media unit costs, Sony is attempting to make PSP as attractive to publishers as possible. Development costs for anything other than ports or remixes will be high, and without an attached licence any new game could be a risky proposition. A paucity of early titles will ensure that simple games like *Puyo Puyo Fever* have a decent chance of selling.

Expect things to hot up on the PSP front in the coming months.

PS Awards 2004



It was no surprise that this year's awards reflected the story currently at the heart of the Japanese game industry: lower sales. No double-platinum prizes (for 2m copies sold) were awarded. Nevertheless, Sony is confident that next year will be very rich in double platinums, with at least *FFXII* and *Dragon Quest VIII* aiming to sell that many copies. While it is true that the lack of such prizes in 2004 works against the image of the platform, everyone is expecting 2005 to be a better year with the two most popular RPG franchises (*FF* and *DQ*) leading the way.

Sony has also decided to reform its budget series for PS2. The Mega Hits! collection (games selling at more than 500,000 copies) was merged with the The Best collection, a unification which points to the growing lack of titles selling 500,000 copies or more in the current market. A new logo and package design have been made to distinguish the old and new The Best collections.

Eleven games received the Gold Prize for 500,000 copies sold:

- *Derby Stallion 04* (Enterbrain)
- *Onimusha 3* (Capcom)
- *Shin Sangokumusoa 3 Moshoden* (Koei)
- *Jikyu Powerful Proyakyu 10* (Konami)
- *World Soccer Winning Eleven 7 International* (Konami)
- *Gran Turismo 4 Prologue* (SCEI)
- *J League Pro Soccer Club wo tsukuro! 3* (Sega)
- *Taeko no Tatsujin Appare 3 daime* (Namco)
- *Kidosenshi Gundam Meguriaisora* (Bandai)
- *Kidosenshi Gundam AEGO vs Titans* (Bandai)
- *Dragonball Z 2* (Bandai)

The Platinum prize for a million copies sold was picked up by four titles:

- *Sengokumuso* (Koei)
- *World Soccer Winning Eleven 7* (Konami)
- *Dragon Quest V* (Square Enix)
- *Minna no Golf 4* (SCEI)

Gizmondo bets all on convergence

Having let Nintendo soften up the mobile market, Tiger Telematics reveals the final form, price and release schedule of its handheld



Other than a decade's head start and a brand name to kill for, the Game Boy always had one thing going for it: simplicity. By contrast, the new generation of handhelds are all convinced convergence is the future. Manufacturer after manufacturer has stuck its finger in the mobile gaming pie and pulled out a strange fistful of plums: mp3 player, Bluetooth, touchscreen, radio.

Gizmondo is a serial offender. Gaming, SMS messaging, camera, music and movie playback, GPS, Bluetooth and GPRS are part of the package, but just when you're about to sit down and christen it the perfect all-in-one you notice that it isn't a phone. So is this random box-ticking, or is there reason behind Gizmondo's largesse?

As a game device, it has some credible potential. Sensibly laid out, the face buttons, shoulder buttons and D-pad allow games to be controlled conventionally. The screen, although dwarfed by the PSP's, runs at a bright 320x240 resolution and, far more importantly, is actually finished and ready to go into customers' hands in Q4 this year at a price of £230. As **Edge** goes to press, its maker is planning to announce a deal which will see Gizmondo supplied with Nvidia chipsets, greatly boosting the unit's 3D capabilities. Following this news, deals with four 'big-name' publishers are in the pipeline, and eight to ten high-profile titles should be revealed in the coming weeks.

Where Gizmondo marks out its own territory, however, is in Tiger Telematics' willingness to try to integrate the device's other capabilities into the mechanics of the games it hosts. Already announced is *Colors*, a gang-based FPS which will use GPS to allow you to receive alerts when opponents physically enter your turf. It has also just been confirmed that the machine will ship with a simple GPS-based game which will allow users to designate their own playing fields anywhere in the world. One tantalising illustration of the idea's potential – although it's important to stress that it's not currently being actively pursued by Gizmondo (or agreed by the FIA) – is





Angelfish **is a classic 2D shoot 'em up, which is a good indication of Tiger Telematics' willingness to exploit more old-fashioned genres which may work best on a digital D-pad**





The only change still to be made to the prototype is this new, final button design





Stunt Car Extreme (above) and the Jensen Button-endorsed *Chicane* will be the first 3D driving games on Gizmondo





tapping into the GPS systems of Formula One cars, relaying their live positions to your handset and allowing you to race alongside them on a sunny Sunday afternoon.

Beyond gaming, Gizmondo has some very appealing properties. While it doesn't operate as a phone, the pre-paid SIM card it will ship with will allow users to send text and MMS messages from the handset, integrating well with the 640x480 VGA camera. While it's a peculiar notion – does anyone rely on texts heavily enough to swap their main SIM card into their Gizmondo, and will having a secondary Gizmondo phone number be more confusing than it's worth? – it makes more sense than having the technology in the device and not allowing users to access it.

The GPS can be used as a tracking device, and applications can be sold that would turn the unit into a navigation system for use in cars. GPRS will also allow users to receive targeted adverts – short film clips or two-for-one offers which would send you a barcode which you could display in the relevant shop. It's an idea that will send a sickening shudder down most people's spines – a gaming device with guaranteed spam – but Tiger is adamant that only adverts which are of active benefit to the user will be accepted. Time will tell, but there's no question that building a second revenue stream into a device which risks being crushed by more established brands demonstrates a kind of realistic thinking which bodes well for its survival.

With all eyes mooning at the PSP, it's Gizmondo's multimedia applications which may well win it the most customers. Running Windows Media Player 9, using standard MMC cards for storage (as well as game software) and supporting USB for data connections, Gizmondo offers a much more plausible way of integrating mp3 collections and downloaded movie files into a gaming device. The quality of playback is perfectly watchable, and audio – whether through headphones or the onboard speaker – is clear and distinct.

Gaming, SMS messaging, camera, music and movie playback, GPS, Bluetooth and GPRS are all part of the package, but it isn't a phone

The contest then comes down to battery life. Gizmondo's claims are modest, and consequently believable – three-and-a-half hours of continuous gameplaying or movie watching, 120 hours on standby.

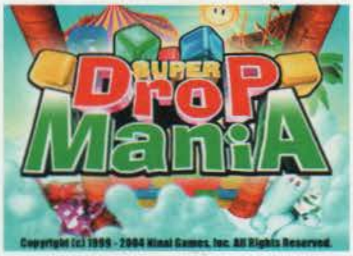
Even with all this, it's still a tough sell. Gizmondo has a lot to explain to a market known to be sceptical and conservative. Without truly excellent, tailored software it's unlikely that it stands a chance. Tiger Telematics is the first to recognise this – confident in its product but keenly aware of its underdog status. It's this that gives the company an interesting edge.

The question then becomes one of whether it will have time to fully exploit the unique qualities of its device before the big boys turn up.





Colors, the first GPS FPS, is a high-risk game. No other genre is as unforgiving of a poor D-pad or a jogged elbow







Super Drop Mania will ship with the device. Part *Tetris*, part *Puzzle Fighter*, part *Pokemon Puzzle League*, it's yet another hybrid block game. Its time-wasting gameplay should be a perfect match for a mobile device, and will provide a good contrast to more ambitious titles

Edinburgh experiences gaming storm

Second International Games Festival to be held in Scotland provides positive signs for how electronic entertainment can be showcased

This isn't a knee-jerk Scottish weather joke, but this year's Edinburgh International Games Festival was greeted with a nasty bout of what was termed 'good museum weather'. It did little to dampen spirits, however, as the festival demonstrated its ability to grow and develop from last year's modest start.

This year there was a much greater sense of public access. Go Play Games, held in the same space in the Royal Museum that previously hosted the Game On Exhibition, attracted enough interest to produce queues which snaked out on the street. Inside, *STALKER*, *Doom 3* and *Four Swords Adventures* all proved successful draws, attracting both holidaying gamers and faintly bamboozled museum goers. It was genuinely uplifting to see good games displayed in the kind of environment we've campaigned so long for: friendly, bright and welcoming. The worth of the experiment was proved by every granny who succumbed to EyeToy and every disapproving father who stopped dead and drooling in front of *PGR2*.

Less convincing were the screenings held at the Odeon cinema. These most clearly demonstrated the challenge which faces the festival: how to balance the needs of the curious but uninformed public, the devoted and demanding game fans, and the serious-minded and occasionally sceptical industry delegates. It's a tall order, and as the festival grows it will become easier for specific screenings to be targeted more precisely at their likely audience.






EA's Steve Shnur, Future's Greg Ingham and Eidos's Ian Livingstone all gave well-received presentations. None got as many laughs as the slightly inept Gametrak demonstration

The conference itself was a mixed bag. Wide-ranging sessions included Seamus Blackley (now with the Creative Artist's Agency) and EA's Neil Young debating – for once in an informed and meaningful way – the old question of whether or not the videogame industry needs to think more like Hollywood. The **Edge** Award jury returned its verdict, awarding the prize for innovation and excellence to *Made In Wario*, while the BAFTA Interactive award for new talent was given to Sony London's Paulina Bozek for her work on *SingStar*.

Lighthearted highlights ranged from Dominik Diamond's exploration of the more offensive end of the four-letter-word scale to the spectacle of the combined wit of Seamus Blackley, Denki's Gary Penn and Future Publishing's own Mike Goldsmith failing to recognise a screenshot of *Half-Life* during the girls-vs-boys quiz finale. The girls (with the help of a gender-bending Jez San) were crowned clear winners.

Although an undoubted success this year, the festival will have to find better ways to provide detailed and specialised debate, without damaging the sense of public accessibility, in order to become a key focus for the industry. And it's accessibility, surely, that is the point of taking videogames to Edinburgh at the height of festival season.

It was genuinely uplifting to see good games in the kind of environment we've campaigned so long for: friendly, bright and welcoming





Go Play Games, despite taking over only a corner of the museum, generated considerable local interest. Friendly and informed staff were on hand to encourage nervous novices



The industry's PowerPoint skills were tested to breaking point – and in some cases beyond it – during the sessions





The girls (top) mime a strange variant of *Tetris*, and (above) Nintendo's David Yarnton accepts his Edge Award

PlayStation Experience heads north

Sony spurns London's baffling Games Week and takes its roadshow to the thrills and spills of Alton Towers

Last summer, Sony taught ECTS how to suck eggs. The second PlayStation Experience drowned out the ailing trade show, attracting ticket sales of over 35,000. This year, as industry attention splits between Olympia's ECTS and GDCE events and ExCeL's Game Stars, EGN and EDF, Sony has cut London's Gordian knot and gone where it thinks the people are.

Following on from the mix of performance and gaming which made last year's event such a success, Sony clearly intends to take full advantage of its music heritage, promising performances from breakthrough urban acts and established chart artists. The event will run for a week, but VIP Experience goers and competition winners will have priority access to the park's most popular rides on Thursday September 23, and will be able to play new and unreleased PS2 titles. These special guests will get to stay on for a lavish aftershow party and mingle with celebs.

Details remain a little sketchy at this stage, with no confirmation as yet of specific titles available at the event. The late announcement prompts speculation that Sony, perhaps unsure of which London location to endorse, was only able to finalise its summer plans very late in the day. However, it's hard to see how the triple attraction of rollercoasters, videogames and late summer sun could fail to pull in punters.







Last year's event (top) was regarded by most visitors as an absolute success. The shift to Alton Towers' facilities will mean a change in appearance, but the aim will remain the same

Recently reviewed

A rundown of last issue's review scores

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Gradius V	PS2	Konami	Treasure	9
Sudeki	Xbox	Microsoft	Climax	6
Chronicles Of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay	Xbox	Vivendi Universal	Starbreeze	7
Spider-Man 2	GC, PS2, Xbox	Activision	Treyarch	6
Front Mission 4	PS2	Square-Enix	In-house	6
Ape Escape: Gacha Mecha Athlete	PS2	SCEI	In-house	5
Richard Burns Rally	PC, PS2, Xbox	SCi	Warthog	7
City Of Heroes	PC	NCSoft	Cryptic Studios	8
Tetsujin 28go	PS2	Bandai	Sandlot	5
Chaos League	PC	Digital Jesters	Cyanide	6



Gradius V



Sudeki



Chronicles Of Riddick



Spider-Man 2

CUTTINGS



Sega enters Chinese PC market

In what will be taken as a mixed blessing by fans of its traditional console and arcade fare, Sega announced at the beginning of August that it had founded a new office in Shanghai, with the intention of breaking into the lucrative Chinese MMO market.

Sega Shanghai intends to launch three PC titles, the most lavish of which is the newly announced *Shenmue Online* (above) – a co-development between Sega and Korean MMORPG creator JC Entertainment. Yu Suzuki will oversee the project, which will apparently allow thousands of players to participate in 'realtime fight action'.

The other two titles are PC online reworkings of existing Sega games. *PSO: Blue Burst* is an upgraded port of the Xbox *Phantasy Star Online*, featuring a small amount of new unique content and an upped polygon count. *CTRacer* is a car-modding and downhill racing title, co-developed with Hyundai Digital, which draws on *Initial-D*.

ESA research: a clarification

In our August issue we incorrectly reported that the Entertainment Software Association has conducted research into the effects of violent videogames.

The ESA has never conducted such research, nor does it have any plans to do so. The ESA does make available information on studies conducted by independent researchers on a variety of issues involving video games but does not conduct or fund research directly.

We are happy to make this clear.

www.discreet.com

Discreet seeks to Max out

As the visuals-creation market grows ever more competitive, old hand 3D Studio gets a makeover in an attempt to show its muscle

In a world where hit games are vital for financial success, even tools companies have been jumping on the bandwagon. It's a trend that's notably impacted the companies supplying the 3D modelling and animation packages that make up the foundation of all development. Softimage's flagship for XSI remains *Half-Life 2*, while Alias uses calling cards such as *Call Of Duty* and *Gran Turismo 4* to highlight the advantages of Maya.

For Discreet, and its 3DS Max product, the situation has been somewhat different. It has traditionally placed less emphasis on poster children, instead focusing on the fact that it's used by the majority of game developers. Discreet claims Max is used in some form in around 80 per cent of game projects.

The announcement of its latest release demonstrates a change of policy, however. Backed by internal reorganisation, which has resulted in its non-entertainment business being merged into parent company Autodesk, Discreet is ready to come out fighting. The most striking example is the high-profile presence of assets from Ubisoft's *Prince Of Persia* sequel to illustrate some of the package's features. Previous releases had been illustrated by models created either by Discreet itself or hired-in freelance artists, so it's a mark of how seriously the company is taking the business of upping its profile. It's also a good example of what Discreet's animation product manager **Dave Campbell** says has always been one of 3DS Max's big selling points.

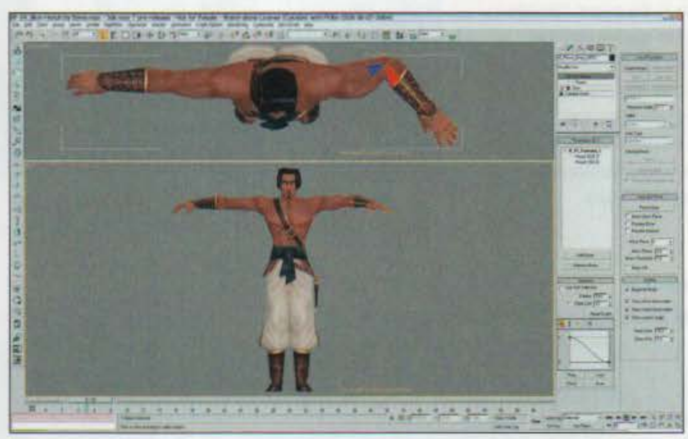
"Games is a hit-driven business: you've got to have hit games in order to stay alive. For developers this can often boil down to having a rock-solid art pipeline, particularly when it comes down to things such as sequels and reusing content," he explains. "3DS Max is a known quantity so there are lots of experienced animators and programmers, which is vital when you need to ramp up teams quickly for sequels or even revive a 3DS Max version three or version four pipeline."

Something else Discreet is keen to stress is Max's cost-effectiveness. Priced at £2,695, the new release comes complete with Character Studio as well. This plug-in package for advanced animation previously cost around £700. It's now bundled with the 3DS Max 7 licence, thanks, in part, to the purchase of Unreal Pictures and the integration of its expertise into the core development team.

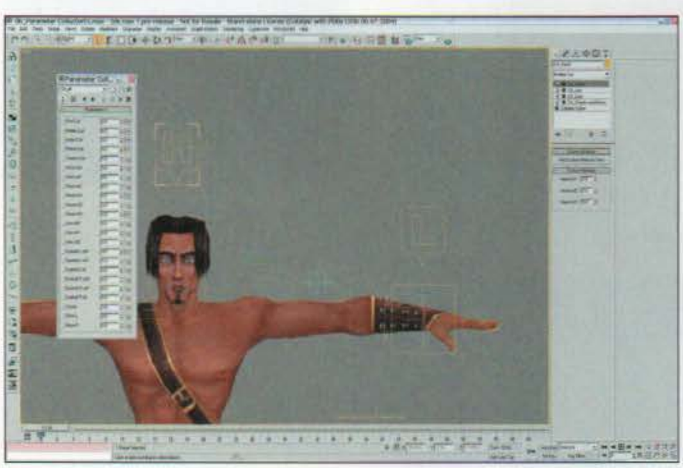
"Even though we've shortened our development cycle and tightened up our team, I think developers will find there are more production features in Max 7 than there's ever been before," Campbell reckons.



A new way of quickly equiping characters with clothes is 3DS Max 7's skin-wrap deformer, which animates objects by interpolating movement from the underlying skin, allowing the prince's threads to move naturally



One production tool in 3DS Max 7 is a skin-morphing engine which means artists can more realistically animate rotational movements, such as the elbow bend seen here



The latest version of Discreet's 3DS Max modelling and animation package demonstrates its power with the help of Ubisoft's all-new prince of Persia

What's in the box?

Corporate positioning aside, there are plenty of new features in 3DS Max 7 to excite artists and animators. A tool to generate normal maps is one key addition, which has been developed in conjunction with clients such as Epic and BioWare. Other tools include a progressive morph engine so artists can set up muscle flexing, and a skin wrap deformer, which means props and clothes can animated directly from the movement of a character's skin. Support has been added so models can be exported in the appropriate format for Sony's PSP, and a similar exporter will soon be provided for 3D Java mobile phones, too. More generally, Discreet has worked hard to ensure models and environments match their in-game look as much as possible by optimising the texture management workflow.

The right suit for the job?

Animazoo's GypsyGyro-18 motion capture suit is so flexible, the company claims that you can even use it underwater

www.animazoo.com



Animazoo's GypsyGyro-18 motion-capture suit contains 18 gyroscopes which transmit positional and rotation data wirelessly to a base station. As well as providing clean data, the system can capture multiple actors in realtime

There's nothing like a big expo to fuel a marketing department's hyperbole. And while 'multi-person motion-capture record to be broken at Siggraph' – the headline coming out of Brighton-based Animazoo – may not be setting the world alight, it's certainly marking the company out as one to watch in the computer animation space.

Strictly speaking, of course, it's arguable whether Animazoo's demonstration of capturing the motion of five actors simultaneously would actually be defined as a record. Films such as The Matrix series have routinely captured many more actors. The rub, however, is Animazoo's assertion that it's the first to be able to capture such motion and use it to drive CG characters in realtime, without any post-processing.

Traditionally this has always been the bugbear for users of motion capture. It's a great way to generate large amounts of animation quickly but it has always taken time, typically days, to ensure the data is clean enough to plug into a game engine, despite recent strides taken to automate the process.

This is where Animazoo thinks its novel approach pays off. While standard motion-capture systems work by defining fixed areas in which optical or magnetic systems are used to track the movement of an actor's limbs, Animazoo's latest GypsyGyro-18 suit uses 18 small gyros which are built into a lycra body suit. Each of these sends positional and rotational information at up to 125 times per second wirelessly to a base station, which can be up to 40 metres away.

The result is that the actors aren't restricted to a particular capture area. The system is quicker to set up, too, with calibration taking about ten minutes, and according to Animazoo's MD **Ali Kord**, the resulting animation data doesn't need any cleaning up.

"Getting good raw data from motion capture is a real first," he says. "If you have to clean up data after a motion-capture session, it's easy to end up destroying the subtle nuances. That's why we say if you're cleaning data, you're killing data."

A corollary is that actors can be recorded doing more specialist activities. Animazoo's systems have been used to capture skateboarders performing in an open arena and, most recently, a motorcyclist travelling at 100mph around a manufacturer's test track. Kord also boasts that with GypsyGyro-18, capturing people swimming is now a possibility. "The only limitation for this suit is your imagination," he claims.



Capturing new markets

As well as usual motion-capture clients such as game and film companies, Animazoo is keen to promote its technology in more novel areas. One of its cheaper electro-mechanical suits has been tested for use in karaoke bars, for example. In this case, the singer's movement is used to animate an onscreen CG character while lip synching is provided by phonetic recognition software which is fed by a small microphone attached to the headgear. Another experiment is the DJ-focused Exosense. This captures the movement of the wearer and uses it to generate sounds, loops, lights and visuals through interaction with a MIDI mixing desk and appropriate software. Perhaps the most bizarre idea, however, is the introduction of motion capture to the courtroom. Labelled forensic animation, Animazoo reckons its motion-capture systems have the potential to enable lawyers to present certain evidence in a much more jury-friendly manner.



OUT THERE
REPORTAGE

01



We've had NES keyrings and belt buckles, but here's something with a truly practical gaming purpose. Nice



02





One of the most twee things we've seen in a while, this is a Flash game created with Tim Burton in mind





A lot easier in real life than on the screen. *Cyrkam Airtos* depends on your mouse control skills and a bit of luck

01 Getting an NES advantage

US: Emulating old hardware on PCs is all well and good, but there's nothing like the feel of a SNES pad when you're hopping around corners on *Super Mario Kart*. It's not just that the cursor keys don't cut it, but something less easily defined: game pads have a feel, a weight, a history and an implied memory, and that's all lost when you try to recreate old software experiences with any kind of up-to-date input. Retrozone's function is more interesting than their mundane name suggests: they refit classic controllers for modern-day PCs, replacing awkward proprietary plugs with USB fittings. They also do converters and multitaps, and while their prices aren't cheap, their solutions are elegant, and sure to make you the envy of every geek in your neighbourhood – even that smug-looking fellow with the NES belt buckle. Visit them at www.sealiecomputing.com/retrozone

02 Flash: saviour of the teabreak

US/Europe: Out There's irregular Flash-game wonderland presents two interactive delights this month. *A Murder Of Scarecrows* is a scratchy, bleak, beautiful thing, polar opposite in aesthetics to orisinal.com but strikingly similar in old-school ethics. It's like a Game & Watch with fluid animation and real physics, drawn with a scribbly stylus by a talented goth, and it sits at www.theskeletonshop.com

Cyrkam Airtos, meanwhile, is located at www.sticky.tv/game/cyrkam_airtos and accurately simulates killing dead time in an office. Balls of rolled-up paper are fed from the background by a colleague; the player controls their character's jointed arm, which has to catch the paper and then toss it into a bin. The arc of the shot depends on the movement of your mouse and the time of release, which makes it rewarding if you've got a responsive controller, and frustratingly near to impossible if you haven't. Our top score after a few attempts: 2,260. Eminently beatable.

Soundbytes

"Oestrogen doesn't necessarily come into play in interface design, for example. With Playboy, I think I have an advantage, as a heterosexual woman, in that Playboy just wasn't part of my past. I was also able to equalise my interest between the pictorial side to Playboy as well as the editorial and journalistic integrity of the magazine."
Playboy: The Mansion designer Brenda Braithwaite talks to warcry.com.

"If Hiroshi Yamauchi phones me up, I will pick up at once."
Bill Gates awaits a very important phone call.

"It was tempting to take a stand and say that our products were never going to use any advanced Creative/3DLabs products because of their position on patenting gaming software algorithms, but that would only have hurt the users..."
John Carmack on the (now-resolved) spat id had with Creative

03 Super Publicity Seeker Alpha

US: As gaming's acceptance/notoriety/back pocket grows, so does its ability to attach C-list stars to its events. 'G-Phoria – The Award Show 4 Gamers' (because the one thing gaming really needs is another awards show) was US station G4techTV's own attempt to imbue the industry with the glitz and glamour of Hollywood. It certainly succeeded, as long as you equate 'Hollywood' with 'Anna Nicole Smith doing slightly dodgy cosplay'. The busty model, previously sorta famous for marrying a nearly-dead rich man and being insane on her own reality TV show, dressed as Farah from *Prince Of Persia* and Ivy from *Soul Calibur*. So, that just about outstrips Jordan playing a prostitute from *GTA*. We await next year's Game Stars, and Holly Valance dressed as Bowser.

04 But is it art?

Australia: The highbrow echelons of the gaming community play introspective philosophers and ask: "Can videogames be art?" But perhaps the question really should be: "Can art be videogames?" because that's one that can be answered more succinctly, at least by anyone aware of Andrew Best's work which, according to the Australian Centre For The Moving Image: 'Collapses differing perceptions of actuality into one another, making hierarchical certainties difficult to determine'. Yes, that was always the problem we had with *Donkey Kong*, determining its hierarchical certainties. Maybe it'll be easier now that Best's collapsed the differing perceptions of actuality using only scaffolding, barrels, drums, fabric, fans, globes, chain and plaster. Level two next, please.

05 Brain war

Sweden: We first covered *Mindball* a few years ago, after a brief encounter with the emerging sport in Amsterdam left the magazine reeling from laid-back defeat. We're much more Zen these days, of course, and now can prove it, thanks to the hardware's (slightly tardy) commercial release. The game's a little like a tug of war played with the brain. Players sit at either end of a table and try to 'push' a ball toward their opponent using mind power alone. Headsets sense how relaxed the user is, and applies force to the ball appropriately; stress out because you're losing and the loss is guaranteed. It's all about striking a balance between not caring and caring enough to not care, which is as curious as you might imagine. Details at www.mindball.se – come and have a go if you think you're blissed enough.

Data Stream If Word made games

Choice cuts from Microsoft's spellchecker, but what are they?

Frottage 2D shmup fun with underwear
Ninja Maiden Very hard but innocent bosses
World Of Aircraft Massively multiplayer flying
Bobtail A solar-powered cat
Vicarage More chaining, vicar?
Shame Ryo hides his face
Parapet The Rapper Fortified rhythm action
Gyrator Man Spinning to the music
Majorca's Mask Makes it look like Tenerife
Grandma An RPG for all the family
Metric Fusion Imperial prime?

03



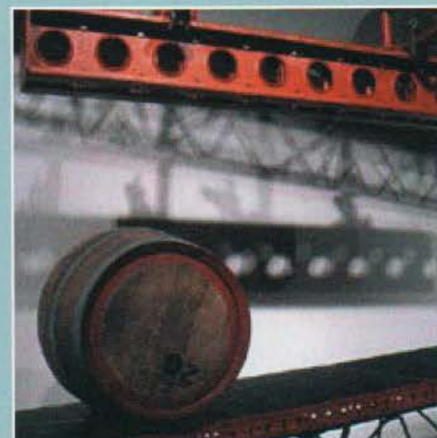
Bow. Orange robe. Puppy. Wig. Plastic armour. Anna Nicole Smith. The most sensible thing in Out There ever



04



A *Donkey Kong* installation sadly lacking in plumbers, princesses or monkeys, it's been christened Pauline



05



Of course, we remember when Mindball wasn't this popular, when it was just starting out, etc, and so on





If you're going to design a sport of the future, it must look at least a bit retro. That is simply one of the rules



06

Simply Games
At the heart of gaming...
www.simplygames.com

Head over to Simply Games and you could be in with a chance of winning free games for a year, including *Halo 2*







06 Win free games for a year

UK: In a blatant attempt to further sell out, we've teamed up with gaming website SimplyGames.com to give one lucky winner the chance to win £100 to spend on games every month for a year.

You have complete freedom to choose any game you want (so long as you're not too young – don't forget those ELSPA ratings now). *Pro Evolution Soccer 4*, *Halo 2*, *Doom 3*, *Forza Motorsport* or *Call Of Duty* – all these blockbuster titles and more could be yours for free.

Also, ten runners-up will get one normal-priced game of their choice, so long as it's on the Simply Games site.

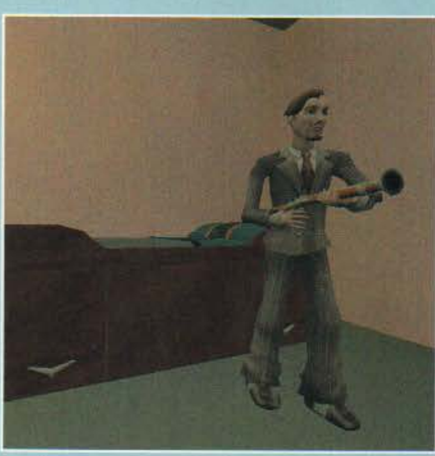
For your chance to win, point your browser at the Simply Games website and click on the **Edge** competition link.

07



The ultimate aim of *The Ship* is to create a releasable game. There are currently three servers to play across







The Ship pushes the *Half-Life* graphics engine beyond the original game. A 3D accelerator is now essential

07 Half-Life ships

Scotland: Five years ago, we devoted a section of Out There to discussing *Half-Life* mods. 'With 163 mods currently in development, even [Valve] must be surprised at the popularity of the pastime', the magazine wrote, highlighting *Action Half-Life* and *Science & Industry* as two of the most interesting. While individual mods come in and out of vogue, the success of the hobby as a whole has proved enduring. More than that, innovation keeps coming, this time in the shape of *The Ship*.

Like an online version of popular university geek-sport Assassin, *The Ship* has up to eight players sneaking round an early 20th century ocean liner, trying to bump off specific targets in creative ways without being disposed of themselves. It makes a welcome change from the traditional guns-and-ammo stylings of *HL* spinoffs, and we suggest you visit www.theshiponline.com for a gander.

Continue

Lego
Digital toysets versus real toysets? Difficult...
Halo 2's marketing campaign
Creating an online buzzz
EA's purchase of Criterion
Better middleware for everyone!

Quit

EA's purchase of Criterion
The monster's just out of control!
Online moneygrabbing
Rumours of 'premium' services on Xbox Live. Don't like? Don't buy
Some of those GBA NES classics
Let's be honest: we're talking filler, aren't we?

08 Killing Monsters

First published in 2002, Killing Monsters is obviously not a new book. In the light of current controversy, however, it is a very apt one. With the subtitle Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes And Make-Believe Violence, it's a firm response to the knee-jerk commentators who can only see in shades of black and blacker.

As Jones, a former comic book and screen writer turned MIT academic, points out, children and young adults are not blank slates, ready to be desensitised by whatever the culture presses upon them. Instead fantasies, including violent ones, are often a way for children to explore and confront their position in the big, wide world in an abstract and non-threatening way. Pointing your fingers, shouting 'bang, bang' then watching an adult wildly grab their chest and die can be empowering experience, not a reason to ban toy guns. The problem, he explains, is not that children are driven to emulate literally what they see in entertainment, but rather that adults are so concerned they often make the situation worse. The headline writers clearly come in for criticism on this point. For example, when a 2001 study reported that children's behaviour improved when they spent less time playing games and watching TV, the papers ran with 'aggressive tendencies in violent TV shows and games can be tempered if they cut back' – a myopic take on findings which hadn't distinguished between *Doom*, *Tetris*, Rugrats or WWE. His conclusion is simple: be involved in your children's lives, talk to them about what they're watching or playing, and don't believe the anti-hype.

09 Time's Eye

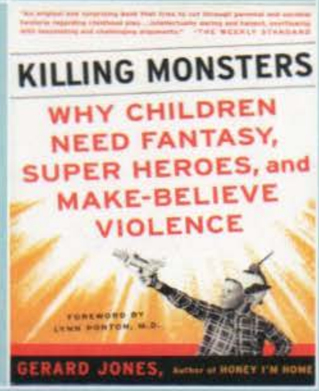
With a background as a scientist and keen to tilt at the logical implications of futureshock, Stephen Baxter has often been compared to Arthur C Clarke, so it makes sense to slap the two together and see what they come up with. Time's Eye, the first of a promised collaborative series, deals with typical themes that have punctuated their work. The clue is in the title: time.

Starting with the concept that an alien culture has cobbled together a copy of Earth created by taking slices from various historical periods ranging from cavemen to astronauts, you certainly get the impression the authors are enjoying their work. While there's enough tongue-in-cheek pseudo-science to keep the hardcore happy, the real fun of the book is the jumbled juxtaposition of historical players. "Do you think it's a coincidence Alexander the Great and Ghenghis Khan, two of the most feared warriors, have both been brought together?" one character asks the other. And the more you think about it, the cleverer the idea behind the book becomes, the unexplained alien intelligence being the guiding pens of the two authors. You can almost hear them chortling down the phone line to each as they come up with another non-sequitur. 'How about throwing Rudyard Kipling into the mix?' 'Great idea, Arthur', and so on.

Of course, whether the Time Odyssey series can manage to keep up such delights in the long run is another matter. For the time being, it's off to a great start.

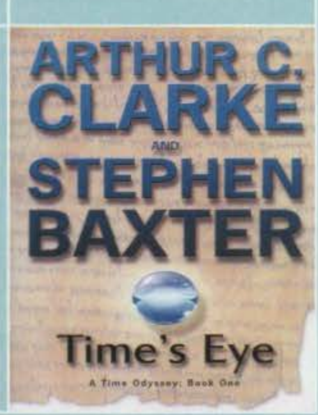
08

Author: Gerard Jones
Publisher: Basic Books
ISBN: 0 465 03696 1



09

Author: Arthur C Clarke & Stephen Baxter
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07530 9



10



Site: **I love bees**
URL: **www.ilovebees.com**

10 Website of the month

The most notable thing about the latest *Halo 2* trailer wasn't anything to do with the game itself. It was the way the www.xbox.com logo at the end momentarily glitched into www.ilovebees.com, setting investigative gamers off on a curious mystery tour, beginning with an online honey shop plagued by technical problems. Hidden messages in corrupted JPEGs imply the presence of at least one rogue AI, and while the storyline is still evolving at the time of writing, vague allusions to *Halo*'s universe make it seem certain this is some kind of precursor to November's main event. To join in the detective work and speculation, visit the ilovebees wiki, over at bees.netninja.com

11 Advertainment

Paper Mario 2, as it's known in the UK, sees a plumber noted for his portliness reduced by one dimension. Losing his Z axis gives our hero all sorts of new powers, however, so he doesn't seem to mind – as this Japanese advert demonstrates…



It's a GameCube game, obviously, and OH MY GOD, Mario is ENORMOUS. Those planes should look out



Mario, now on a sheet of paper, begins to fold up. A sharp crease through a sensitive area is the first



Even folded, Mario still manages to dwarf the 747s. He heads off down the runway to take to the skies…



…and lands in the game. Either he's shrunk from his earlier titanic proportions, or the game's huge, too



The stylised look of 2D characters in a 3D world is shown off to good effect by legions of familiar faces



Just what we needed to defeat Bowser – a horde of Bobomb paratroopers. He still looks pretty fierce, mind



A voiceover announces: "The mysterious adventure of *Paper Mario*" and the theme tune dinkles its thing



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

Smoke signals

Just past the railway tunnel, around the corner from the dentist's surgery, before you hit the harbour and down the road from Science Girl's house; just beyond the boundaries of logic but before we reach the impossible; just the other side of a shot of whisky; just sober, just; that's where you'll find Johnny Casino's House Of Games.

Ah, Johnny Casino. Variously: smart, stoic, scurrilous, smoking in the shadows with glorious cheekbones. Specifically: a journalist of some note some time ago, a word sniper for hire, loquacious on paper but evasive in person, always punctual and always deadly. Casino retired from professional games journalism after a sub editor left his prose mortally wounded. A man of pride, RedEye's hero writes for himself and himself alone, punching out thousands of words of game theory on his busted-up typewriter, then incinerating it in his garden. They say that on glorious summer evenings, when the grass is fresh cut, the air smells of burned meat and the bugs make love on the hot asphalt, you can squint to the west and see Casino's thoughts going up in smoke, a giant insult to the games industry written against the sunset.

They're right, actually. That's how Casino does his advertising. Smoke signals. To RedEye's knowledge it has only ever worked on one person, and that was RedEye. When a blackened scrap of paper landed on RedEye's window sill, he knew to whom it belonged.

So that's how RedEye knows Casino's still writing, and what he wouldn't give to read some of those words. It seemed inevitable that he was destined for greater things. When Casino quit the journalism game, the first thing RedEye asked him was what he was going to do next. First came silence – Casino excels in the kind of pause that carves a question mark on your spine – and then the answer. "Johnny Casino… is going to write something important." The unspoken assumption on RedEye's part was that Casino was going to write the great unAmerican novel. In fact, the laconic lothario actually meant a letter to his bank manager.

Hence Johnny Casino's House Of Games, a small, elegantly decorated boutique on the edge of town that's financially supported by love, honour and creative accounting. The House Of Games sells videogames, but is like no other institution in the country, insomuch as it is neither soullessly generic nor striving to attain individuality by developing an atmosphere and aroma akin to a 15-year-old boy's bedroom. Johnny Casino's House Of Games is defined by the House Rules, the only work of Casino's meant for public consumption – read instruction – for many years, an abridged version of which is reprinted for your edifice and education here.

Rule one: No shoes, no shirt, no service. If you are a tracksuited chav with no manners or style, a teenage girl with hoop earrings bigger than your head or a shifty heroin addict who smells of dog, then it is assumed you will either try to steal from Johnny Casino or pay with money earned by stealing from people Johnny Casino loves. Johnny Casino will not have thieves in his store, unless you count himself, Stealing The Hearts Of Beautiful Russian Spies.

Rule two: No sell-out. Johnny Casino's floorspace belongs to one person, and that's Johnny Casino. Promotional stands clutter and confuse. Shelves will hold one copy of each game, never more, never less. There will be no pre-ordering, nor will Johnny Casino's beautiful staff ever answer the phone with a sales pitch. Game pods – one of each – will play the best pre-release software, not the most heavily marketed. A bar will sell alcohol to customers of age, and alcohol-free whisky-flavoured Slush Puppies to those in training.

Rule three: Beautiful staff, beautiful shop. If you want purchasing advice, ask the good-looking cowboy at the bar. Anything else, and Johnny Casino's House Of Games' beautiful sales reps will be happy to not-mislead you. They know nothing about games, but they are experts in the deadly art of being helpful and polite. They will not try to foist this week's special sell-through into your pasty, sweaty hands in pursuit of a bonus. They will answer factual questions with factual truths, take your money with a smile, and look damn fine.

Rule four: Organise appropriately. Games that are similar go next to each other. This isn't pigeonholing, just a different way of thinking. Eye-level shelves (the top shelves, because anything above that is stretching, and stretching ain't cool unless you're stretching for the hand of a hot girl who's falling into a hotter volcano) have the best games according to intelligent critical opinion, the opinion of Johnny Casino and his close friends, then standards fall to the floor. The 'shoot things a lot' section contains single copies of *Halo* and *Ikaruga* at the top, and a small, elegantly scripted card says if you like the latter, you might want to check out *Viewtiful Joe*.

Rule five: Johnny Casino's House Of Games does not play advertorial over the in-store sound system. It plays jazz. The in-store televisions do not show lavish trailers. They show jazz. There is fine air conditioning, and every hour the most sweet-smelling assistant breezes round the store, filling it with an unthreatening aroma.

A journalist of some note some time ago, a word sniper, loquacious on paper but evasive in person, always punctual and always deadly

Rule six: Do Not Ask For A Loyalty Card As A Slap In The Face Often Offends.

Casino's idyll is a lesson to us all, but most specifically to current dealers of our electronic fix. While many features are unworkable in a modern world, it is time to look at another way of selling games. RedEye's friend decided to get back into games, but, pressured into buying a PS2 and *MOH: Rising Sun*, backed out again. *EyeToy* and *PES3* changed his mind, but RedEye isn't a game doctor, prescribing to the needy. He's not asking for a bar in every store – not yet – but Casino's paradise is clear, pleasant and informative. That'd be a start, wouldn't it?

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s. Email: whoisredeye@gmail.com*

We don't think only with our minds. Our bodies think too. As psychologist Timothy Wilson shows in a book about what he calls 'the adaptive unconscious,' our sensory systems monitor and filter information all by themselves before deciding what to present to our conscious attention. Your muscles go through an intense high-speed choreography just to avoid bumping into someone in the street, without your having to deliberately perform all the separate twists and steps. Athletes and musicians train 'muscle memory,' so that legs and fingers will work of their own accord in dizzyingly complex harmony. When I am writing, my fingers sometimes appear to construct sentences by themselves and my mind then decides whether it's garbage or not. To mean anything in the real world, as certain robot-centric AI researchers already believe, intelligence must be embodied.



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

More hair, less identification

What does this mean for a videogame that attempts to situate us in an otherwordly space? I have written before about disembodiment in firstperson games and the way this works against identification with your fictional character. You can see your hands holding an assault rifle, but look down and you don't seem to have any feet, as though you are an unfortunate amputee sitting on an anti-gravity disc. Your field of vision might pop up and down to simulate footsteps, but this is as likely to make you feel queasy through motion sickness as to persuade you of real movement. Too often you feel like a mobile reticule, and high-speed FPSs such as *Unreal Tournament* essentially become cursor-wielding contests.

Now, gratifyingly, a game has come along that not only acknowledges this dissonance but goes a long way towards solving it. *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* is, to my mind, the first firstperson adventure to have thought hard about issues of embodiment and character in the genre, and its subtle and intelligent engineering is a triumph. I cast a shadow that lurks before me in gloomy interiors, creeping up walls and along ceilings. I can swing my fists in front of my face, and if someone hits me my head gets knocked to the side. I look down and – yes! – I have lower legs that seem to be in reliable contact with the floor.

But that's not enough, of course, because Vin Diesel has gone to the trouble of recording his voice for the game, in his inimitably excellent style of I've-just-woken-up-after-a-long-night's-partying-and-I-haven't-had-any-coffee-but-I-could-still-kill-you, and Mr Diesel (which, let's face it, is a cooler name than Mr Unleaded) presumably wants his image in the game more consistently than in occasional cut-scenes. So we switch to thirdperson whenever we have to climb over crates or down ladders, operate door controls, or get a shot of nano-meds, and thus we get to see the superb likeness of our lovable big baldy very frequently. It's a good commercial solution, but it's also a brilliant gaming solution – because clambering over crates, or down ladders (or more usually falling down ladder shafts) is exactly the sort of thing that is hideously annoying to do in a firstperson view. And it also brings us closer to a psychological identification with mirror-eyed vest dude. I never tire of the little nano-med cut-scene, and every time I see it I get a pleasurable wince out of seeing the needles plunging into Vin's neck.

Okay, so wait a minute. I thought about writing 'my neck' at the end of that last sentence, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do so. For one thing, I have a lot more hair than Vin. Perhaps the embodiment is not complete. In a way, I still consider the protagonist of the game to be 'me' in the firstperson view and 'Vin' in the thirdperson. But it's not so strictly compartmentalised. In fact, I find that each thirdperson sequence reminds me that – hey! – I'm Vin Diesel, and for the next few moments back in the firstperson action I *am* Vin Diesel. Which is not to say that my hair falls out, but that some part of my mind faintly imagines Vin Diesel's enormous shoulders and torso down below my virtual point of view as I creep up behind someone and execute a vicious two-handed neck snap. And then the effect wears off and I'm just me again, until the next thirdperson sequence.

My mind faintly imagines Vin Diesel's enormous shoulders and torso down below my virtual point of view as I creep up behind someone

So, for me, *Riddick* does not quite achieve total psychological consistency in its illusion of embodiment, but it's important to note that even when I am 'just me' during the game, I am a me who seems more convincingly situated in the gameworld than is usual in the firstperson genre, thanks to the sight of my forelimbs and shadow, which I am happy to accept as 'mine' as they are less immediately identifiable as those of Vin Diesel.

It's a complex problem, this one of embodiment and situation in the virtual space, but it's not just a matter of vertiginous psychological theorising. A breakthrough in the illusionistic mechanics of embodiment, as provided by *Riddick*, constitutes another advance for that slightly vague phenomenon we call 'immersion'. In short, in *Riddick*, because for at least some of the time I am *really him*, I feel I am more *really there* – more than in *Deus Ex*, or *Thief* (which, in its third iteration, arguably glumly acknowledges the embodiment-versus-character problem by offering switchable first or thirdperson views, but does not find the kind of triumphant synthesis offered in *Riddick*) or even *Halo*. Helped by the superb, bumpy, light-scattering textures, the pervasive aesthetics of rock, rust and grime, and the emphatic clanks and echoes of the sound design, the game offers about as close to the experience of being in a maximum-security penitentiary on a distant planet as I ever really want to get.

Consider the fact that a seamless experience of embodiment in the digital realm might be exceedingly weird. Suppose some future EyeToy could subject you to a full-body scan, so that it would be *your* arms and your legs visible in firstperson and *your* body and face in thirdperson. How would we react? Would we cognitively rebel against such a dramatic confrontation with ourselves? How would it feel to see our personal avatars maimed and killed? Embodiment is a seductive idea, but a potentially troubling one too.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com





AV OUT

Toshihiro Nagoshi

Just can't help acting on impulse

Oh nooo! I can't take this any longer! Actually, don't worry, nothing dramatic has happened. It is just, well, at the moment Japan is simply too hot. Every day is like being plunged into an inferno. We have even experienced 40 degrees! Believe me when I say that the Earth's climate is in disarray. No, seriously, it has been said that Japan has been much hotter than India lately.

I have difficulty with such hot temperatures and this year's scorching summer is being especially hard on me. In these conditions, staying inside at home during my days off or while on vacation is getting on my nerves, so I usually decide to go outside. But there's the problem: it is really hot outside. I can't stand it – in fact I have problems just standing still.

But this brought something to my attention: it is nearly impossible to do anything in such conditions, but it is also true that this may be the right time to try to start something new... Well, I realise not everybody would think like this but this is how my mind works. Normally, you get interested in something after seeing it or listening to it. It gets your attention, triggers your imagination and creates inside you this will to do something accordingly.

In my case, there is almost no reason for why I feel this way, but don't you find it interesting when people start something with a lot of passion without any visible, obvious reasons? Well, I find this fun, anyway.

No, really, I do. Why is that? Well, maybe because of its surprising aspect. I mean, you are being totally confronted by the unknown, a true adventure. Each surprise can bring you more enjoyment. You can't ask for any advice in preparation for what you are going to be adventuring into, because if you do get to know in advance what is interesting (or not) the surprise element will simply not exist.

So don't ask for any advice, and don't go through any preliminary preparation either. Many people would start planning, asking for advice and making preparations for what they are about to begin. But when they do so, they surely arrive at that point when they say to themselves: 'Oops, that looks much more constraining than I initially thought'. Or even: 'This looks like being very expensive, after all'. Negative points appear, and your initial excitement is replaced by a much more cautious approach – that is if you don't end up feeling totally discouraged about the whole endeavour.

That is not very good. I really think you need to go with your initial passion and excitement to undertake your idea straight away without asking for advice or making any preparations. Well, this is very much the feeling I have at the moment: it's a wave and I'm surfing on it.

OK, then, you're asking, what is it you're going to start? I know you are wondering what I'm about to do. Well... it's surfing. Yes, I know I don't like the summer and the hot temperatures, but this is a way for me to begin liking summer. But this will not come easily. It's going to need some work.

When I had this idea I rushed to the nearest surfing shop, and the man there explained to me exactly what I would need. I see now. To be honest, I was thinking that this latest adventure was going to cost me a lot of money, but I was surprised to discover that it was really not that costly, even for the board (although the clothing was a little expensive).

The next step of my adventure brought me to the car dealer... Yes, I mean, you need a car which 'fits' your new passion... Well, in my case I just needed a car. I'm not crazy, and I don't need any advice from surfers on what kind of car I would need to buy. It is not a matter of feeling like a surfer from what I drive – I just need a car which can transport the board. You see, I drive a Ferrari and it can't possibly be fitted with a surfboard carrier – it's just not possible, and would look absurd anyway. I was very reasonable and managed to get a car for not much, just around a million yen (£5,000).

As I'm writing this column, I'm looking forward to next week when I'll be experiencing this sudden new adventure of mine. So will my latest impulsion be gratified with satisfaction or turn into deep disappointment? I will tell you after I've been doing it for some time. But something is sure: such behaviour gives you a lot of excitement. It is really good to feel it.

So, you're asking what the hell all this talk about taking up surfing has got to do with videogames? I'm coming to that, I promise. This latest adventure of mine reminds me of how I initially joined Sega and how I have worked and behaved inside the company all these years.

When I decided to join Sega, it was definitely not something I had carefully decided. I did not take the time to compare the good and bad things about the different companies in the Japanese videogame industry. I had no knowledge of videogames anyway, and I did not even have any experience with computers! I managed to get myself an interview and I found myself working inside a videogame company, with computers. But this did not mean I was not suited to becoming a videogame creator. I mean, I have managed (more than managed, actually) to make a living from this work all these years.

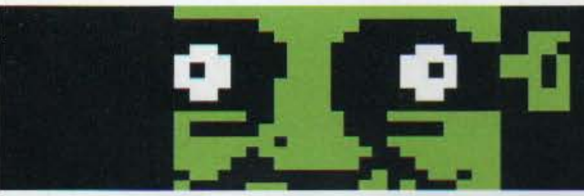
Being impulsive is not a problem, I think. It can bring you to great things. But then you might reply that it was just damn luck, and bloody good timing, that I got the job in the first place. You could argue that I'm just extremely lucky! But just think about it for a moment: isn't it gratifying to follow your impulses and your instincts sometimes? It works really well for me. Great ideas or achievements may come from being impulsive, from sudden thoughts.

Isn't it gratifying to follow your impulses and your instincts sometimes? It works. Great ideas or achievements may come from being impulsive

Now, will surfing turn into a great achievement or into failure? Will the way I have gone about starting my new hobby pay off the way it has in the past? Only time will tell.

See you!

Toshihiro Nagoshi is general manager of Sega's Creative Center division. His games include the Super Monkey Ball *series and* Daytona USA



BIFFOVISION

Page 30, press hold, and reveal. Digitiser's founder speaks out

Trampling on bad design

Don't judge a book by its cover, they say. But it's a stupid saying. If you see a book with a picture of a naked tramp on the front called Pictures Of Naked Tramps Vol 3, and it bears a sticker reading 'You will see lots of pictures of naked tramps – stripped, washed and shaved for your pleasure – in this book', then the chances are you know what you're going to get.

Admittedly, that isn't always the case with a games machine. I mean, who could suspect the evil which lurks at the heart of the average, harmless-looking personal computer? To all intents and purposes, consumer electronics are designed to evoke a sense of their purpose and who they target. Nintendo clearly believes consoles are toys, which is probably why it made the GameCube resemble a block of Lego, while Sony and Microsoft make no bones about the fact they're targeting as wide an audience as possible with their consoles – but the trendsetters first and foremost. Nevertheless, you have to wonder why all three don't spend a bit more time and money on the aesthetics of their hardware.

Though I'm fortunate enough to own more than one games machine, the downside is there simply isn't room to have them all beneath the TV. At least, not unless I wish to have a length of flaming bamboo inserted daily between my grumbly cushions by the lady of the house. So, aside from my PC, I can only have one games machine on show at a time. And, I have to confess, it's the PlayStation2 which has worn the biggest hole in front of my telly. Absurdly, this has nothing to do with the games. Yes, we all know that the GameCube boasts the sort of games that proper, devout gamers like to play. And yes, the Xbox also has plenty of games worth shouting about. But the ghastly truth of the matter is that the GameCube and the Xbox absolutely suck as far as the look of them goes.

The former has a ridiculous joypad – too many buttons, and a stupid layout – while the latter is just horrible in every sense. And you can chuck the sodding Game Boy Advance SP in there too; I've not played on that in yonks, because it's so nasty. Couldn't they have just stuck a frontlight on the far more pleasing original GBA? The SP has a comfort level equivalent to riding in a car with square wheels over a pebble beach while sitting on a special pouffe made out of cacti and being force-fed a list of similes. By a naked tramp.

Upon its unveiling, the PS2 was heralded as a revolutionary piece of design. Oh, how the press releases cooed over it. Slimline, subtle and evoking the spirit of 2001: A Space Odyssey, we were told again and again. At the time I hated it. To me it looked far too much like a piece of serious computer hardware rather than a home entertainment device or – let's be honest – a toy.

But despite that, while still thinking the PS2 is one of the most insipid-looking consoles ever – the original PlayStation, Mega Drive and Super Nintendo are all far nicer to look at – it's so bland as to be inoffensive. You don't notice it sitting there in the living room. You can tuck it between the armchair and the TV unit, and people will mostly mistake it for the shadow of a book. Perhaps even Pictures Of Naked Tramps Vol 4.

Not like the Xbox, which until recently I hadn't played on for almost six months. I shelved it in a fit of pique after wasting £40 on the dreadful *Knights Of The Old Republic* (if this was a Star Wars film it would be called Re-turd Of The Jobbie). Only recently did I dust it off for the impressive *Full Spectrum Warrior*. In those interim six months there were a number of exclusives I never played, simply because I knew it would mean having to get the Xbox out and plugged in, and the end bit of the controllers found (why do they come off? WHY?!). I'd have to suffer the annoying, fiddly black and white buttons, and the equally irritating rounded coloured ones. It's just too much trouble.

Heck, even though I knew *Red Dead Revolver* would probably look better on the Xbox than the PS2 I still went for the latter version because I didn't want to look at the Xbox, or touch the Xbox, or have the ugly thing staring back at me. You wouldn't want a hideous, fat crone glaring at you from the corner of the living room. You'd put a bag over her head, or make her wait in the bedroom.

Perhaps you shouldn't even be aware a console is there. Either have it blend in with your other below-telly boxes, or make a feature of it

Aside from the fact that the Xbox is larger than the average family saloon car, it's just a sucky, uninspired piece of design that's as unpleasant to hold as it is to observe. You can imagine they sat around in the meeting, the designers throwing out wild ideas, before some sappy exec piped up: "Oh, just make it a big black box... and put some sort of X on the top. Nothing too fancy."

One needs only look at the iPod, or any of Apple's range of computers, or take a trip around Carphone Warehouse, to realise that Nintendo, Microsoft and even Sony have a heck of a long way to go before their systems can compete with other consumer electronics design.

The PSP looks like a step in the right direction, but there's still a whiff of the '90s about it – especially when we're told that the official version will lose the sexy, flat controls in favour of raised buttons. It comes across like an anorexic blend of Lynx and Game Gear. But if the PSP looks dull, the Nintendo DS looks positively stinkmongous. It's functional and nothing more, and if Albert Speer had designed handhelds he would've conceived the DS. Nintendo should make *Luigi's Bunker*, or *ExciteReich DS*, for its launch.

In the same way ugly people wish we could love them for their personality, I simply can't bring myself to love consoles just for their games. I don't like what the Xbox looks like, or how the GC pad feels, so I tend to favour games on PS2. I don't even like what the PS2 looks like, but needs must. Heck, I buy more PC games than anything, chiefly because it's in a cupboard and my mouse and keyboard are wireless. Perhaps that's the solution: perhaps you shouldn't even be aware a console is there. Either have it blend in with your other below-telly boxes, or make a feature of it. Either way, if the next generation of hardware doesn't tease my sense of cosmetics, I'll have to entertain myself in another way. Naked tramp photography, anyone?

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

Edge's most wanted

Tribes Vengeance

We're still a little rusty, as evidenced by the occasional bone-fracturing failure to reconcile thrust and gravity, but *Tribes* remains in an airborne league all its own.



(PC) Vivendi

Pocket Kingdoms

Pathway To Glory has whetted our sceptical appetite for N-Gage gaming, and Sega's luminous *Pocket Kingdoms* is still by far the most alluring option.



(N-Gage) Nokia

Okami

If you've seen Capcom's recently released footage, you'll understand. After the final Clover logo fades, wonder, gratitude and breathless anticipation remain.



(PS2) Capcom

Paper Mario 2

The Japanese release is little more than a taunt, dangling the game just out of your reach until it's fully equipped with a characteristically good translation.



(GC) Nintendo

Life on Earth

Why videogames need a David Attenborough

When you first walk in to Go Play Games, the first thing that doesn't assail you is the noise. The second isn't the smell. There may be flickering screens lined along the walls, and there may be clumps of 12-year-olds slowly orbiting them, but this isn't an arcade. This isn't a videogame speakeasy, where codewords of credits and counters give you entry. This is more like a polite zoo, each gaming exhibit shifting nervously in the light, a neat card instructing visitors on its genus and habitat.

But just as you start to feel queasy, you bump into a familiar face – an old friend's mother here to see what this weird new interloper is doing in her sacred museum. The usual awkward sentences follow, where you reveal how you failed to live up to your early potential as a lawyer/doctor/part-time barman. She almost manages to hide her contempt. And then she says it: "So, what's this all about, then?"

Here's a chance, you think. Yes, you'll prove her scepticism unfounded. You size her up and wheel her over to *Prince Of Persia*. She looks about Errol Flynn's generation, curled up on rainy Saturdays with a box of All Gold and a period romance. The prince, dashing and artful, leaps and lands – dark eyes flashing. You risk a glance at your target, only to see her brow has hardened. "What are you doing?" she queries. "Are you just showing off?"

On to *Wario Ware*, then, since it's Irresistible™ and Accessible™. You match a potato and shake a dog's hand. She's looking at her watch. She doesn't care that 'Look! It's Metroid'. Inspiration. *Project Gotham Racing 2* (below). Within a minute you've whisked her from rain-struck Edinburgh to sun-sharpened Florence and she is in raptures. Her nails dig into your sleeve and her free hand thumps your arm. "This is amazing. It's amazing! Amazing! Where can I – how do I get it? Do you have any literature? I must have some – ah!" And with that, she hooks your show guide out from under your arm and waves her goodbyes. Next stop: Dixons. You don't feel queasy any more.













Pariah

Unreal's creator returns with a new FPS vision and a secret weapon – and it's one you won't spend the game looking down the sights of



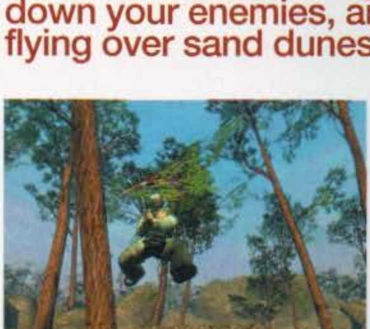
The developer still has an eye for striking imagery, from shootouts in the rising flood to the hunchbacked dropships' insectile menace. Visually, *Pariah* looks to reprise the splendour of *Unreal*

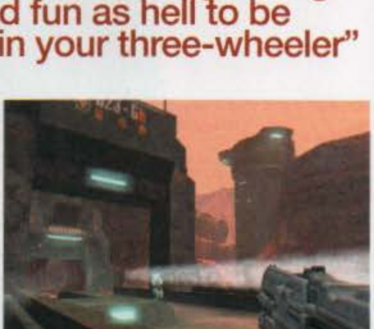


"Too many games have crap stories," observes **James Schmalz**, Digital Extremes' founder and creative director. "Especially firstperson shooters, and we want to break that mould – love it or hate it, we've got a story you'll remember."

Tough talk for any game, let alone an FPS, but *Pariah* marks DE's first attempt to step out of the shadow it cast for itself with the original *Unreal*. Where that game would certainly showcase a talent for memorable event-driven narrative, its new title hopes to repeat the coup with a character-driven one.

"It's fun to be sneaking in corridors gunning down your enemies, and fun as hell to be flying over sand dunes in your three-wheeler"





Pariah's multiplayer will largely ignore the subtleties of the singleplayer game in favour of fast action, but Schmalz promises "a couple of brand new game types" in addition to standard modes

Set on the penal wasteland of a derelict future Earth, the player assumes the slumped shoulders of disgraced military doctor Jack Mason, sent to recover prisoner Karina J and escort her off-world. As could be expected, the extraction goes disastrously wrong, leaving Mason and Karina on the run from both the military and the inmates.

With his bruised eyes, receding hairline and bad skin, Mason is one of the most fascinatingly vulnerable protagonists this side of *Silent Hill*. His lack of combat training will apparently have an effect on gameplay, but it's unlikely to be a marked one – the genre, after all, suggests even a physics PhD with Coke-bottle glasses can reload a combat shotgun like a pro. Mason's initial effectiveness in firefights, though, could easily be outclassed by that of his charge.

Karina should prove more than capable of holding her own, thanks to the foundation provided by the bot AI from *Unreal Championship*: surely the acid test of response to riot situations. But even if that sidesteps (or circle-strafes) some of the potential pitfalls of guiding a companion NPC through the game, the challenge is to simulate a believable character, not just a deathmatch player. "It's definitely been a concern of ours, and we've addressed it simply through brute force," says Schmalz. "She has a massive amount of animations and dialogue [and] we've spent a huge amount of time on her AI."

Much of the game will take place in sprawling outdoor areas, with the action occasionally brought into tighter confines. "We wanted to give the player a wide variety of completely different sections, and also take advantage of each environment to affect gameplay," Schmalz explains. "So it's fun to be sneaking in dark corridors gunning down your enemies, and fun as hell to be flying over sand dunes in your Wasp three-wheeler."

Sections intended for vehicles have been



Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Hip Interactive**
Developer: **Digital Extemes**
Origin: **US**
Release: **2005**

Previously in **E**138















arranged as physics toyboxes, with objects to collide with and scatter (including unfortunate pedestrian enemies) and jumps to take. Even so, the player is free to attempt them on foot, although the suggestion leaves Schmalz nonplussed: "You can run through those sections, if you like. But it's just not as fun."

With all the engine-flexing on display, in addition to a level editor (it's unclear if this will feature in Pseudo Interactive's PS2 port) and multiplayer support, it's interesting that DE is so eager to talk up the storyline. Although not talk *about*, perhaps necessitated by its evolution during the course of development: Schmalz mentions that the team is on the fifth draft, and that components of the game have changed with each revision to ensure they are intertwined. "The most difficult thing has been developing and integrating the story well – it's much more than a justification of the singleplayer context. We're quite singleplayer focused, although the multiplayer has gotten a lot of good attention."

In concept, at least, it is fresh evidence that a genre often accused of encouraging lazy copycatting is in fact enjoying a new wave of confidence among developers, a sensation DE is well aware of. "It's great to see games like *Riddick*, *Far Cry* and *BF1942* pushing new ideas," agrees Schmalz. "And we just started playing *Doom 3*, which is a hell of a lot of fun. Some games push the genre more than others, but it's attracting more and more people and justifying larger and larger games. So it's good for us, and good for the future of FPS games."



Rather than rely on the good graces of previous doctors to seed *Pariah*'s Earth with medkits, Mason carries a 'healing tool' that can be used at any time. However, excessive dosage causes his vision to blur (left), a nasty side-effect to suffer in the heat of battle

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

It's one small step towards release and one giant leap for mannequin-kind as GTA treads a stream of fashion consciousness



Diet, exercise and lifestyle now play a part in shaping *San Andreas'* lead character CJ. Quite whether the fickle '90s fashions will be able to keep up with an expanding waistline is unknown





If this were any other game, such a straight-laced drip-feed of details would be likely to cause little other than apathy. How many cars? How many levels? How many guns? Such details are normally confined to fact sheets, and count for little more than fleshing out a game's abstract. But then the past two *GTAs* have been created in such a way that those details and numbers are what kept people playing for several dozen more hours than the story did.

Much like *Halo*, *Vice City*'s form and function have seeped so deeply into the mindset of gamers that all it takes is a morsel or two of detail to get the appetite going, alive with the possibilities that such specifics bring. And it seems that Rockstar has chosen to hand the player of *San Andreas* the kind of avatar customisation and twiddling that's rarely seen outside of online gatherings or 'create-a...' modes in sports games.

In fashion-conscious urban gang culture, your colours say just as much about you as who you're hovering a target reticule over



Whereas Vice was a city of neon and funky nightlife, San Andreas' look seems to be one of lazy sunsets and palm-lined suburbs

The appearance of lead character CJ isn't just an aesthetic choice, however; in the fashion-conscious circles of urban gang culture, your colours say just as much about you as who you're hovering a target reticule over. As the opening missions are completed, CJ starts to garner respect from his gang, the Orange Grove Families, and can up his esteem within the group by kitting himself out with the right apparel. Conversely, rival gangs and the police will be able to spot CJ far more quickly. Clothes shops are dotted around San Andreas, from the functional bargains of Binco to the more expensive, brand-led chic of SubUrban. Certain missions require certain get-ups, with the player no longer guided to a suitable, spoon-fed icon as in *Vice City*.

Barbers' shops are also present, with your hairstyle mooted to command respect or derision from pedestrians as well as rivals. It's not so much freedom as a strategic choice, but one that can be tailored to make your movements through the game world as seamless or thorny as you wish.

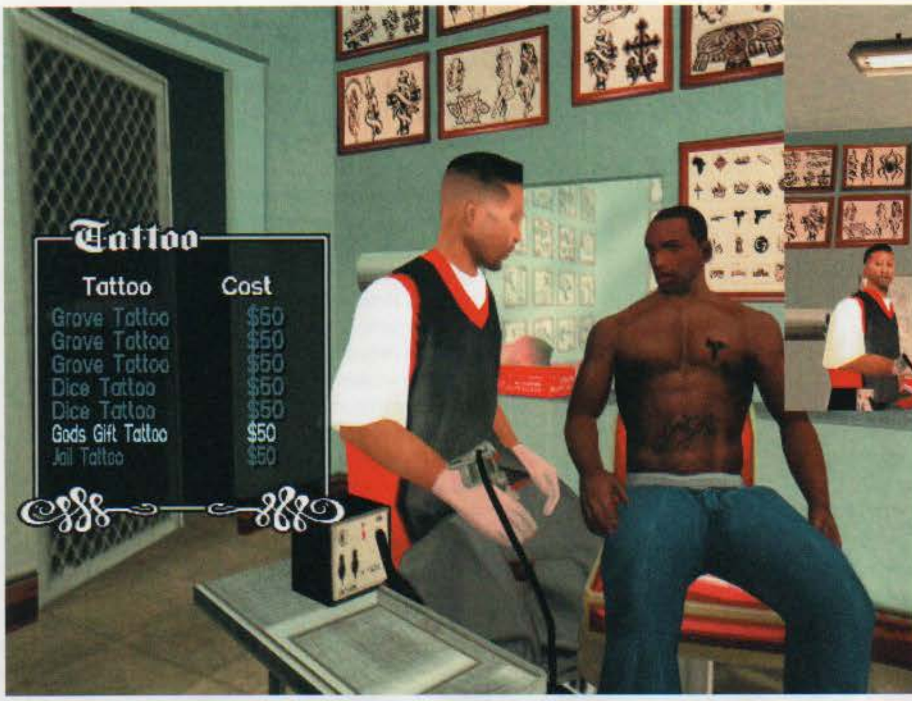
Rockstar has been keen to point out the vagaries of burglary, too, an option which is to become a necessarily reliable source of cash; CJ's role in this *GTA* is no longer that of a glorified goon for hire, and so financial rewards for progressing through the game aren't guaranteed. Whereas *Vice City* featured just a handful of stores to be held up with a gun and a few seconds of posturing, a robbery in *San Andreas* needs planning, the right outfit and a getaway van. Wearing a balaclava or ski mask puts CJ into sneak mode, useful since ransacking someone's home can only be performed during the night. Plundered items will have to be fenced, and the classier areas will provide more valuable fodder for organised thieves. Just how rife the opportunities for this Grand Theft Manual will be are unclear, but it seems to feature the kind of scope that raise it above a mere subgame.

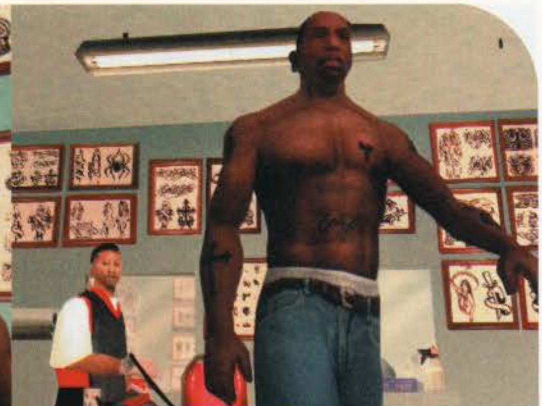
It seems that *San Andreas*' theme of play is as much about expansion as progression. As well as the myriad city locations and outlets detailed so far, there are those that show the state's sprawling countryside, promising the kind of offroad expanse that

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Rockstar**
Developer: **Rockstar North**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **October 22**

Previously in **E**138, **E**140





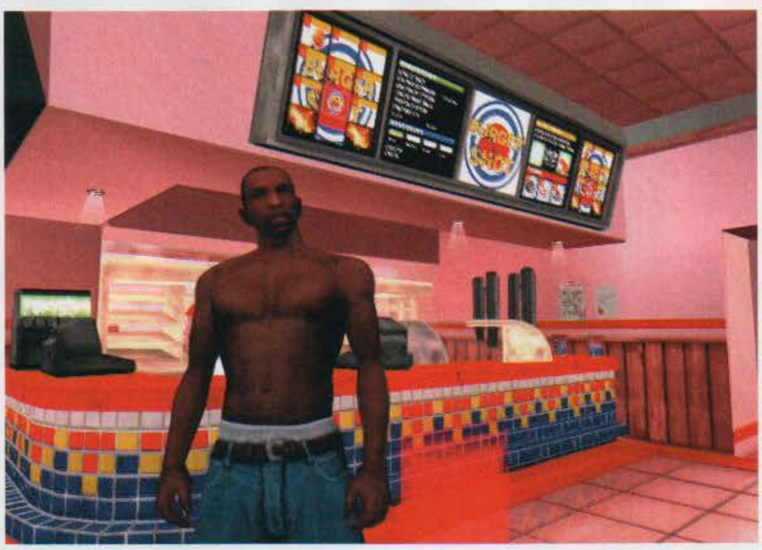




As well as barbers and tailors, CJ can visit tattoo parlours to sculpt his appearance and – as circumstances dictate – blend in or stand out



It's not just the car that makes a man in San Andreas, but the 'do. And the threads. And the tatts. Appearance is customisable on many levels



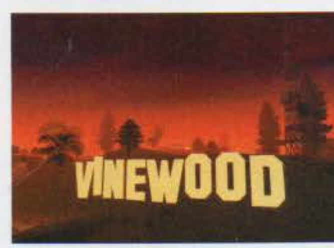
once formed the playground for entire games (Rockstar's own *Smuggler's Run*, for example). The scope becomes all the more dizzying once you realise that these are the areas *in between* the cityscapes where the bulk of *GTA*'s gangster pantomime plays out.

An RPG's worth of depth is being injected into *San Andreas*. If it can be implemented as smoothly, capably and gracefully as the series has managed with the geekier elements of gaming – of rewarding experimentation and exploration, of burgeoning collection-based side quests – then gamers maybe shouldn't start to get excited, they should instead start getting worried for how deeply the *San Andreas* bug may bite.









This is *San Andreas*' riff on Hollywood. The big question is: what do you get in return for pulling a wheelie through the 'D'?

Oddworld Stranger

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **Oddworld Inhabitants**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Q1 2005**

Previously in **E**139

Oddworld goes west and finds a new hero, a new style, and a new twist on animal cruelty





Oddworld Inhabitants, partly because it's a nice pun, wants you to believe that Oddworld Just Got Stranger. It's a valid gag, since *Stranger*'s titular hero is a departure for the series: mean, graceful and self-assured. But it's also a bit of a con because, in many ways, Oddworld just got normaller. *Stranger* takes the series into the realms of far more conventional gameplay, namely a thirdperson/firstperson adventure with guns, puzzles and fistfights.

However, Stranger is far from being a conventional game hero. Part bear, part Aslan and part Ron Perlman, he strides through the game's lavish western pastiche like he owns it. Pick up a new bounty from the office in town and then stalk off into the sunset, looking to even some scores and earn some readies. If you should forget where you're headed, you can talk to yourself, causing Stranger to growl out some reminders about what you've signed up for. You are free to toggle between thirdperson and firstperson modes at any time, but the game does impose some rules. Approach an obstacle – say, a rope that needs to be climbed – and the game will slide you automatically into thirdperson so you can see more clearly what you're doing. In thirdperson, however, your offence is limited to fists. Firstperson is where your gun comes out.

Except it's not a gun and it doesn't shoot bullets. Stranger carries a double-barrelled shortbow, but before you can fire it you'll need to hunt some ammunition. Load it with wasps, skunks and chipmunks and you'll discover each critter has unique powers. A spider will wrap an enemy in a web cocoon, immobilising him until you scoop him up for the bounty; skunks become stink bombs and wasps serve as your machine gun.

The world Stranger hunts in is vast and lavish. The only level Oddworld Inhabitants has revealed so far – an assault on a well-patrolled fort – is intricate, offering several points of entry and lines of attack. Enemies are serious enough to make the firefights matter, but stupid enough to make it feel like this is still Oddworld. Even the boss lurking inside appears to have been calibrated for fun rather than frustration.

The game could hardly look more promising. With a style all its own and a confident spin on some enduringly successful gameplay, *Stranger* might already have the burgeoning western craze all sewn up. The biggest question hanging over it, perhaps, is just how it's all going to be crammed into an ageing PlayStation2.



The village sections are where Oddworld's traditional humour becomes most apparent. The grumpy hysteria of the local chicken-people is suprisingly endearing and is ably matched by the expressive and entertaining animation

GoldenEye: Rogue Agent

Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **In-house (EALA)**
Origin: **US**
Release: **November**

Previously in **E**138

That's Ar Oh Gee You Eee, not Ar Oh You Gee Eee. Has the industry learned nothing from Rouge Leader's blushes?

In a perfect world, picking the internet's most commonly misspelled word for its tag line would be *GoldenEye*'s biggest problem. A sequel to one of the most saintly games ever made, its new publisher needed to tread carefully around a brand that many gamers feel they can more claim ownership of than EA. Unfortunately, in an effort to invigorate the game's design, the company may have trampled over its brilliance.

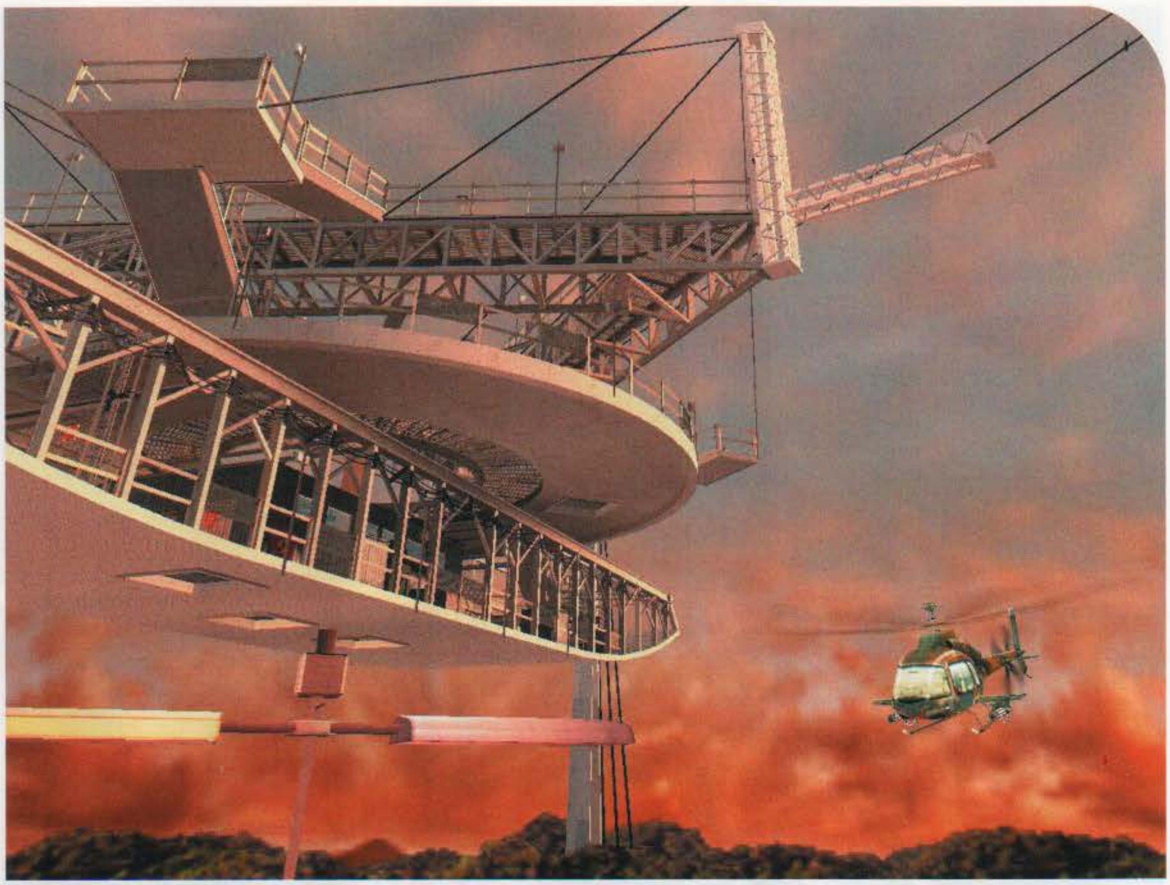
Rogue Agent's hook is that you don't play Bond. You play a renegade MI6 agent, swept up in a war between Goldfinger and Dr No. Having lost your eye in the fight, you now have a golden replacement, which brings with it super powers (along with, presumably, very complicated insurance requirements). The game remains in the firstperson, and its other big innovation is that you carry twin weapons.

It's around this point that doubts begin to surface. You have free choice of the weapons you combine, except for any large ordinance which requires two hands. However, from the initial levels we've played, it was hard to gauge how much difference this made from simply being able to carry two weapons and swap between them – the system seems to add neither a tactical edge nor a visceral thrill to the gunplay. Dispatching enemies seems to be a simple equation of filling them with enough lead so that they fall over: bullets seem to count for as little in the game as they do in the films.

Your golden eye will have four powers, but so far only two have been revealed. The first is a magnetic shield, which – coupled with the game's recharging health system – means that what most often kills you is simply your own lack of patience.

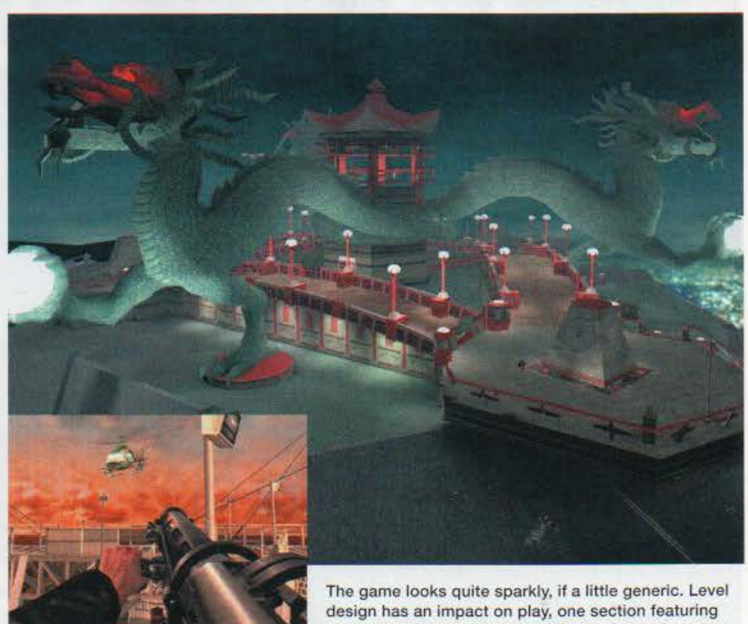
The second is this season's essential accessory, the telekinetic grab. This allows you to hoist opponents into the air and fling them to their deaths, but is much more poorly implemented than in games where it forms a core component of the gameplay. Eye powers have a limited use, and must be powered up by performing 'good' kills and headshots before you can use them again.

The most telling aspect of the game is perhaps its placeholder HUD. Scheduled to be completely redesigned before release, right now it's one of the clumsiest and most ill considered we've ever seen – all flash and no function. The game may yet prove to be a perfectly good FPS, but there seems little chance of deserving the name it inherits. *Rouge Agent* it is, then.









The game looks quite sparkly, if a little generic. Level design has an impact on play, one section featuring revolving panels to provide a brief second of cover

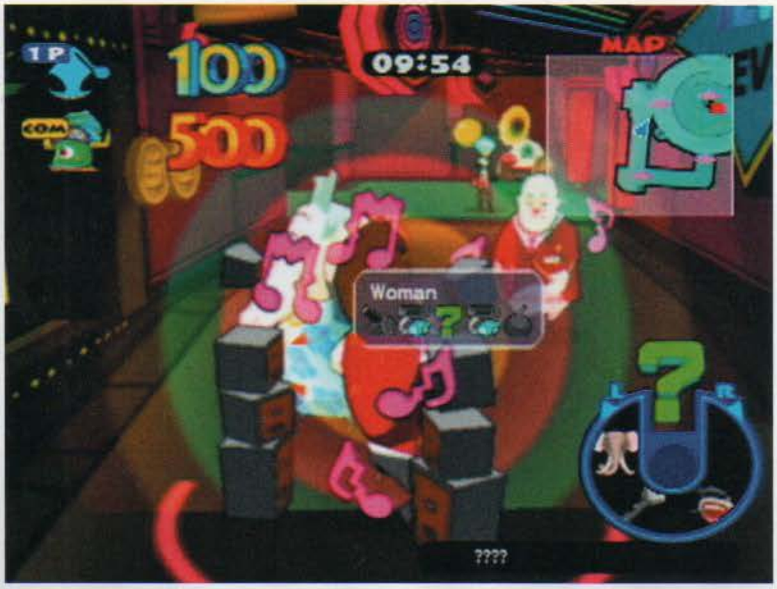
Under The Skin

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Capcom**
Developer: **In-house (Production studio 4)**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Out now (Japan), October 29 (UK)**
Previously in **E**136 (as *Panic Maker*), **E**137

Capcom puts away the swords, the pistols and the virus, and wheels out the slapstick

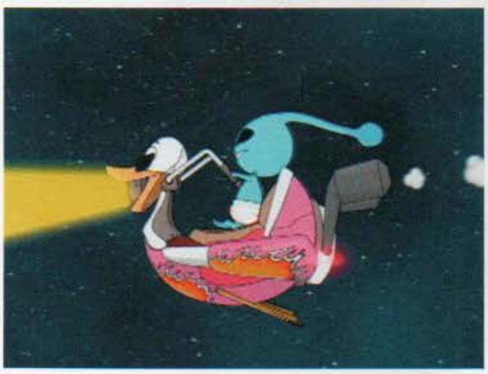














One of the levels is set in a magnificently cute iteration of Raccoon City, where the ghastly Nemesis himself has to be pranked to the point of dropping all of his coins. No mean feat, especially with the T-Virus munching its way through your inventory

Under The Skin's plot is taken straight from the bottom-left-hand corner of an episode of Trisha: "My three-year-old son's causing chaos in a nearby galaxy!" It's maybe a fitting comparison for a game consisting of cartoon violence and social mischief.

Alien Kozumi has just turned three. As is the traditional rite of passage for all inhabitants of the Meiwaku star system, he must travel to a neighbouring solar system and cause as much mayhem as possible in order to qualify for maturity. Which, of course, is where Earth comes in, used not so much as a sandbox as a litter tray for a prank rampage of this alien interloper-cum-teenage tearaway.

Kozumi can 'scan' any one of the inhabitants of *Under The Skin*'s compact levels, and use one of many nearby UFOs as a changing room to assume that person's form in order to wander unnoticed. Every time you change into a fresh skin you're given five comedic contraptions to unleash on the populace who, when suitably harassed, will drop coins for you to collect. There's no limit to how quickly you can use up your five mischief-making devices; in fact, using them up in quick succession on a confused and dazed crowd is often the best way to tease out ever-greater numbers of coins. But once they're gone, you'll need to find another body to snatch, and repeat the process all over again with a replenished fistful of destructive props.

It's the satisfaction of these props that's a major part of the game's appeal. They range from simple kindergarten troublemakers, like an extending boxing glove or a handful of tacks, to weapons of mass disruption – a T-rex stampede, for example, or an oversized, flaming bowling ball.

The levels feature another alien, one who's often an opponent in a dash to get the greatest coin total, or sometimes an ally in a fight against a larger, common foe. Take a pratfall over one of your own traps, or those set by a rival, and you'll spill some coins and have to continue in your pants. Take another hit and your true form will be revealed, meaning you'll have to transform again pretty quickly or be beaten by the victimised humans around you.

It's longevity that seems to be *Under The Skin*'s greatest problem; while it seems to be a worthwhile twoplayer deathmatch game, when the jokeshop charm of it all wears off it seems that there may not be much remaining under that skin, after all.

Blinx 2: Masters Of Time And Space

Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Artoon**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Q4 2004**

Artoon's broken timepiece gets another chance to prove its worth, roping in yet another dimension for the cause

Artoon seems to have been granted nine lives' worth of grace, with the chance to put right the wrongs of what was, to many, an astronomical letdown. The original *Blinx: The Time Sweeper* was a game that choked rather than purred under the tick-tock logic of time control, scuppered by the confused and undernourished implementation of an ambitious set of ideas.

Has Artoon set out to make amends? The first five minutes of the game certainly implies so. Whether as a concession to the hateful character design of Blinx himself, or as a sweetener for a game that's been fitted out with some significant multiplayer options, *Blinx 2* opens with the chance to customise your feline Time Sweeper to within a whisker of your heart's content.

There seems to have been a significant relaxation in terms of time controls, too. Collecting a time-control power is no longer a matter of having to match three pickups in a row, but simply a case of collecting any and all of them as you go along. There are moments when the use of time controls are prompted, too, such as when confronted by a blast of enemy firepower from a nearby gun emplacement.

The Time Sweeper's quest, however, is just a quarter of what *Blinx 2* appears to offer, which is where that plural in the title comes good. A horizontal splitscreen mode allows for cooperative play through the main quest, and is the only way to open up a number of areas that have to be tackled in tandem.

However, it seems that the masters of space aren't the titular Time Sweepers; the game includes a parallel quest that follows the stealthy antics of the thieving Tom-Tom Gang, and features a similar twoplayer cooperative element. Playing as the Tom-Tom gang involves infiltrating strongholds patrolled by Time Sweepers, and is facilitated by using decoys, banana skins and stun darts to scupper the guards on patrol. And this is where the game's fifth dimension comes into play, with your Tom-Tom characters able to enter subspace, sink into the floor and scan the area ahead for as long as they can hold their breath.

So, *Blinx 2* offers far-ranging character customisation, a team-based reconsideration of the original and an entirely new spatial spin in the form of the Tom-Toms' quest. Enough with the new, though: does enough of the old *Blinx* still remain in the new game to make it all for nought? Time, all too appropriately, will tell.











When confronted with shrapnel from an enemy gun emplacement, you've the option to pause, and suck up the bullets with your sweeper, or slow down time for a Matrix-style series of bendy dodges





Mercenaries

Format: **PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **LucasArts**
Developer: **Pandemic Studios**
Origin: **US**
Release: **February 2005**

Previously in **E**138

The first tiny cracks appear in Pandemic's status as Most Exciting Game Developer In The World





Vehicles can be commandeered, and forces loyal to factions which feel favourably towards you will fight on your side. Unless you start shooting them

It was one of the best pitches of E3, no question. The idea of running riot in a war-torn North Korea, balancing the ambitions of the Chinese army and the Russian Mafia against the concerns of your own morality and the limitations of your bank balance, was almost irresistible.

For now, what Pandemic has to show is an inevitable letdown. Months of development remain, but the game as it stands lacks the spark of its premise. Although a tiny gauge in the corner demonstrates the warmth of your relationships with each of the rival factions, there doesn't seem to be much evidence of unrivalled freedom or free-wheeling tactics in the activities you undertake. Gunning, running and attaching explosives to cabins seem to work pretty much the same whether you're doing it for love of money or love of country. The only flash of character is the ability to log in to your Russian Mafia arms account and order up a couple of missiles mid-battle – for instantaneous delivery. It's a pleasingly preposterous system, but it will be interesting to see how it impacts on game balance.

As things stand, *Mercenaries* seems like a game with a big mouth and rather ordinary trousers. We look forward to being proved wrong.





The choice of three main characters, including the requisite shapely lady, should add a greater sense of variety and personality to the story

Tony Hawk's Underground 2

Format: **GC, PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Activision**
Developer: **Neversoft**
Origin: **US**
Release: **Autumn 2004**

The sound of the first Underground was mostly groans and yawns. Neversoft's sequel promises more in the way of oohs, aahs and ows

Even the steamroller of the Tony Hawk brand couldn't iron out the wrinkles in the first *THUG*. Crass gags and pointless missions did little to enhance the revolutionary gameplay which made the skater's virtual name.

For the sequel, thinking caps have clearly replaced beanies. Alongside the Jackass-meets-South Park of the main story mode, the complete 'classic' Tony Hawk experience has been recreated, where more serious-minded skaters can take full advantage of the lavish and complex environments constructed for the game's world-tour theme.

There are also encouraging indications of Neversoft having experienced the game the way players do. The new tantrum move, which lets you trigger enraged animations should you land on your face, also stokes up some fresh points to start off your next combo. The bullet-time slo-mo effect, which at first seems like an empty gimmick, is actually designed to help you nail tricky landings. The design-your-own-skate-sticker tool will trigger happy *Jet Set Radio* memories, but also allows you to incorporate a 'sticker slap' move into combos.

Touches like these give cause for hope. Whatever else, any game that features a skateboarding, apple-throwing Benjamin Franklin can't be all bad.





Levels are almost intimidatingly intricately designed, encouraging exploration and rewarding the discovery of hidden areas. The World Destruction tour is meant literally – environments can be blown up to reveal new routes and ramps



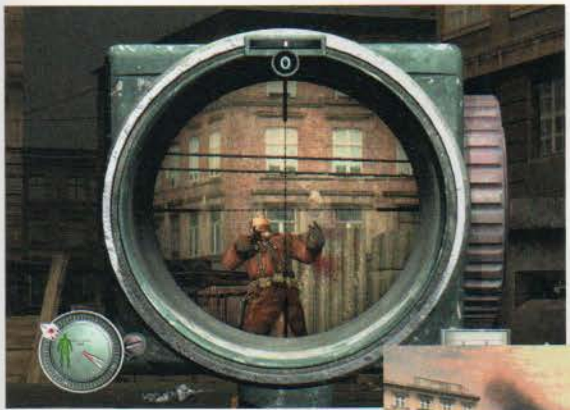


Hidden characters have their own bizarre forms of locomotion and, as a consequence, their own personalised objectives tailored to each level

Sniper Elite

Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **TBC**
Developer: **Rebellion**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **Q1 2005**

It's an impeccably researched, super-realistic WWII game! But hold your flogged, dead horses: Rebellion has a fresh take



The game currently includes a rather gory 'bullet-cam'. Great for confirming kills, it's a little harder to stomach the sight of your bullet spiralling unstoppably into an unsuspecting eye socket



It may be 1945, and it may be Berlin, but this isn't quite the game you're expecting. *Sniper Elite*'s American hero, a laconic special forces operative, has been dispatched to the city to set his sights not on the Germans, but the Russians. The United States, having got to hear of a Russian plot to seize experimental German nuclear weapons, has realised that it's the Eastern Bloc which is about to pose the biggest threat to world peace. This isn't a late WWII, this is an early Cold War.

Although you'll be able to explore and fight in thirdperson, the game's heart is the firstperson sniping mode. You'll be required to consider wind and trajectory degradation, as well as needing to get into position early enough for your pulse to steady. Berlin has been majestically recreated, and the potential for learning the secrets of the rubbled streets and of the thrill of locating that perfectly shadowed rooftop is enormous. The game's multiplayer also presents peculiar possibilities: will other human players really have the patience to sit it out right at the other end of the map? An unusual prospect indeed.

With the game already close to completion, Rebellion intends to announce a publisher for *Sniper Elite* in the coming months.





As things stand, the oddest element of the game's HUD is the health bar, which squeezes a human figure into one side of your compass

Star Wars Republic Commando

Format: **PC, Xbox**
Publisher: **LucasArts**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **US**
Release: **February 2005**

Previously in **E**138

Republic Commando may have filched Samus Aran's visor, but it doesn't seem to have stolen her sense of adventure





Your commandos are ordered through a panel of icons displayed on your HUD. The system is fluid, helpfully indicating each trooper's health



Bigger enemies require your troopers to make the best use of space, and these moments, rather than the more predictable corridor gunfights, show up their AI limitations



The clue is maybe in the fact that the squad you command is made up of clones. The theory behind LucasArts' shooter is sound – blend the immediacy of an FPS with the depth of an on-the-fly squad game, and set it in the increasingly over-crowded but endlessly appealing Star Wars universe. The practice – so far – is looking disappointing.

Your clone troopers feel clumsy, and your command over them is basic at best. Although they can be trusted to heal each other when wounded, you'll be required to laboriously instruct each one in turn to use the healing station they're all slumped against. As extra firepower they work well in plain corridor sections, but once confronted with a boss they're as likely to be in the way as not.

Context-sensitive commands (such as the door-breaching manoeuvre demoed to such effect at E3) break up the monotony, but may not be enough to convey the sense of being in true control of three other individuals.

It may be that there is a lot more to the game than LucasArts is currently willing to show. There's certainly plenty of time for more variety, depth and precision to be worked into the basic framework. Without it, however, *Republic Commando* could remain as soulless as its troops.

Yoshinetsu Eiyuden

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **From Software**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **January 2005**

Though Otogi's Raiko may have hung up his swords for now, From has another samurai legend to recount





From has never been overly concerned with finessing its in-game cameras, something that could prove a concern with *Yoshinetsu*

Heartened by the success of its Zen-and-violence *Otogi* series on Xbox, From has stepped up to the challenge of taking on Koei's *Dynasty Warriors* with its own historical mass-combat epic, literally *Legend Of The Hero Yoshinetsu*. It's a move that could be described as 'brave', among other terms, but the developer has chosen to bolster its chances by pitching to the larger PS2 userbase. Whether the more tactical approach *Yoshinetsu* takes will appeal to the genre's traditional audience is another matter.

Playing as the 13th century warrior of the title, you command a small infantry squad with face-button-issued commands: attack at will, form defensive position, assert pressure and charge. In addition to this level of tactics – which admittedly may be only as involved as alternating button-mashing between 'heavy attack' and 'charge' – Yoshinetsu can be supported by a maximum of two allied heroes. While they are capable of fighting independently, direct control can be assumed, allowing the player to set up multi-pronged battlefronts.

It may lack *DW*'s spectacle – packing noticeably fewer combatants on screen – but in attempting to outthink Koei's juggernaut rather than outnumber it, From may yet gain a foothold in the genre where other competitors have failed.





The gouts of blood drawn by Yoshinetsu's strikes come as stark contrast to *Dynasty Warriors*' cheerful light-show maimings – From intends the battles to be more grimly realistic

Hard Luck: Return Of The Heroes

Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **Spike**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Q4 2004**

The Towering Inferno comes to PS2 in this latest disaster survival title: we hope it's the drama, not the game structure, that prompts cries for humanity

Disaster games, it seems, come in threes: following Konami and Irem's fire-fighting efforts, Spike is throwing its helmet into the ring with a search-and-rescue operation that could prove to be the most interesting of the crop.

As a fire breaks out in a high-rise building, you take charge of one of three player-controllable heroes – one accidental, the others more intentional – in their attempt to escape the blaze and save the rest of the 20-strong cast. The fire spreads in realtime, so spending too long in an area can result in your escape routes being blocked as the flames take hold; the building's power, security and access systems will also degrade as the situation worsens.

Rescuing your fellow occupants is a matter of guiding them through the inferno to 'safe zones'. Some will follow the player willingly, whereas others require more coaching. Survivors can be led by the hand or carried, at the cost of precious time, and in a somewhat sadistic twist the player may sometimes encounter a group which can only be rescued one by one. Both the plot progression and the game's conclusion will change based on who gets out alive, and this, coupled with each character's divergent storyline and abilities, should provide replay incentive.



Spike claims to have paid particular attention to 'fire physics', suggesting the building's death throes may play out differently with each game







Max the cop and Douglas the firefighter may be more practically useful, but 'designer' Scott Winkler has them beat for snappy dressing

Armored Core Formula Front

Format: **PS2, PSP**
Publisher: **From Software**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **Q4**

A side chapter in the Core canon sees human error removed from the equation, along with human control



Armored Core's PlayStation Portable debut, now revealed to be accompanied by a sister PS2 version, is a proposition for mechsmiths who consider getting their hands dirty to involve grease and circuit boards rather than being strapped into a cockpit.

While construction and stat-balancing are player-controlled, combat is strictly hands-off, with your mech's performance in arena duels dictated by its programmable AI. Each battle is assessed by a VS Analyzer to pick out weak spots, allowing the player to address deficiencies in their AI strategy in post-match pep talks. Multiple mech/AI configurations can be created and stored for comparison.

Compared to previous *Core* titles, then, the focus is less on fashioning an exoskeleton and more on fine-tuning the brain behind it – the kind of pseudo-programming language strategy that has been largely neglected on console since the likes of *Carnage Heart* (though it's as yet unclear how intricate *Formula Front*'s options are).

From has declared both versions will feature unique content rather than being ports or companion pieces, but has remained tight-lipped on details. The two versions should be able to exchange data, if only to allow those crucial extra moments of AI building on the morning commute.

The PSP version (not shown) is just as visually sharp as its sister machine's version, but some would-be early adopters will be disappointed that *Formula Front* is a strategy title rather than a fully featured action game







Dramatic camera positioning during the battles should allow From to play up the series' customarily crisp, clean mechanical design

Armored Core Nine Breaker



Format: **PlayStation2**
Publisher: **From Software**
Developer: **In-house**
Origin: **Japan**
Release: **October 28 (Japan), TBC (UK)**

Meanwhile, the main series thunders on, looking to draft new players and set veterans duelling to the mechanised death





AC's menus have always done a good job, but *Nine Breaker*'s new streamlined layout should remove the need for a pen and pencil



The Arena mode's stages vary in size and makeup from no-nonsense death pits, such as the one on the left, to more intricate complexes



After seven years and nine versions of From's most successful series, the developer is apparently concerned *Armored Core* may be losing its edge – although a fanbase as committed as AC's is unlikely to mutiny for a few more incremental updates yet.

Nine Breaker is intended to perform the difficult balancing act of answering fan expectations while bringing new players into the fold. Newcomers will be able to sign on for a training mode, intended to teach every detail of piloting through more than 150 lessons.

Even better, the routinely obtuse menu system (one of the disappointments of the recent *Nexus* outreach programme) has been redesigned for ease of use – and not a moment too soon, as the already colossal quantity of customisation options are to receive a further shipment of new parts.

The hardcore *Core* audience is addressed with Arena mode, which pares the game back from battlefront scenarios to pure mech-on-mech combat across a selection of varying stages. Entering the tournament as a lowly Ranker AC, players fight for the right to square off against the reigning champion for the Nine Breaker title. An online ranking system will provide bragging rights without the need to make physical contact with other puny, antlike humans.

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates

Alien Hominid

Format: GC, PS2
Publisher: O3
Developer: The Behemoth





This gleefully violent *Metal Slug*-meets-indie-American-cartoon-Flash-game comes to console – well, two of them – packed with new content, twoplayer coop and some fabulous explosions

Psychonauts

Format: PC, Xbox
Publisher: Majesco
Developer: Double Fine





Tim Schafer's prodigal psychic son returns, rescued from post-Microsoft limbo by Majesco. Some of its once-dazzling mechanics have lost their shine to recent psychic upstarts, though

Star Ocean: Till The End Of Time

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Ubisoft
Developer: Square-Enix





Till nearly two years after the original release, too, but Ubi is turning around the PAL version in double-time. The wait for western localisation has at least ensured we get the director's cut

Freedom Force Vs The Third Reich

Format: PC
Publisher: Vivendi Universal
Developer: Irrational Games





Irrational's Silver Age superhero romp, previously to be self-published, has secured VU's backing for its American release. The fate of the game's European release remains on a cliffhanger

Starship Troopers

Format: PC
Publisher: Empire
Developer: Strangelite





Better late than never, Empire's FPS treatment goes straight for the central nerve stem: the early footage is promising, if curiously lacking in urgency. But there's time enough to get it right

Pathway To Glory

Format: N-Gage
Publisher: Nokia
Developer: In-house





It's quite simple: *Pathway To Glory*'s demo is the first and only N-Gage game which has caused us to run our batteries dry. Demanding, flexible and lavish, its multiplayer potential is still huge

Sid Meier's Pirates!

Format: PC, Xbox
Publisher: Atari
Developer: Firaxis





The Sullivan-Bluth-styled makeover of *Pirates!* demanded a console version like it demands that exclamation mark. Xbox owners can now plunder the Spanish Main from the comfort of their couch

Super Mario Ball

Format: GBA
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Fuse Games





Mario Pinball's Japanese release (did we mention it's from UK devco Fuse Games?) is due at the end of August. Its easy charm and good looks continue to impress in both territories



Full circle

With Halo 2 almost ready to roll, we make a return trip to Bungie's Seattle HQ in order to find out whether the wait has been worth it



Asking Bungie about the singleplayer component of *Halo 2* is still useless. Journalists do their best, playing the rephrasing game until it becomes embarrassing, but no matter how they twist direct questions into innocent-sounding gambits, Bungie will not budge. "We're not here to talk about the oneplayer game" becomes the familiar refrain.

Later, we get to speak alone with Bungie's studio manager, **Pete Parsons**, and ask if the secrecy is an attempt to give *Halo* a mystique, to make a geeky sci-fi FPS interesting in the same way Fry's made Turkish Delight seem exotic. "I can't talk about the singleplayer game..." he predictably begins, but then goes on to answer the question: "It's not about teasing our fans. We want *Halo 2* to be a surprise – to let gamers experience for themselves all the thrills and spills of the plot."

But keeping secrets can be hazardous. Bungie's decision to reveal absolutely nothing of *Halo 2*'s singleplayer campaign could backfire if the game doesn't live up to everyone's expectations. And that's the problem. With nothing to go on but a short demo revealed at E3 over two years ago the world has been abuzz with expectation and wild speculation ever since.

Cheekily, Bungie has even been poking a stick into its own forum, stirring up the crackpots and obsessives with the 'OFFICIAL Halo 2 Speculation Thread': 'Earth may be a storage planet for the Flood – they are hidden under the pyramids' and 'Master Chief will hook up with one of those 'new' female marines, and will have a half normal, half enhanced kid' are two posts setting the general tone.

Parsons is unapologetic about such activity: "The Bungie.net team is a big part of the company and it's one of the things that makes us special. I think our fans realise that we're having as much fun as they are. The team has built a vibrant community ensuring that the games don't end when they get released. For *Halo 2* we're going to turn it up to 11. On Live we're going to support fans with adjustable playlists and downloadable content. The singleplayer game is just the beginning."

Turning it up to 11 – is that the **Edge** score he's predicting? Whatever the case, this is a company supremely confident about the material it's about to release in just a few months' time. There's no sense here that *Halo 2* will disappoint in any way. You can see it in the Bungie swagger, the glint in the eye of delegates wheeled out to take questions before refusing to answer them. It's as if to say, speculate away, it doesn't matter – *Halo 2* will be everything you hoped for and more.



Game: **Halo 2**
Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Bungie**
Origin: **US**
Release: **November 9**



Bungie significantly rewrote the graphics engine to accommodate more players in larger maps. Though poly counts have been reduced, *Halo 2* emerges better looking



The Covenant plasma gun combined with the new SMG is a potent duo. One knocks out a foe's shield while the other tears through the body to devastatingly lethal effect









Though the singleplayer game has still not been shown off outside of Bungie's walls, the company is keen to emphasise that the AI has been overhauled and improved for the sequel. We shall see

We're given a tour around Bungie's offices, which is amusing if only to watch journalists trying on full-size Master Chief costumes. That aside, it's unlike any developer we've visited. Not because it's powered by state-of-the-art technology or decorated like a plush New York apartment, but because there's no one here. Well, hardly anyone. Turns out most of the staff work the hours they want to maximise their creative energies. Clearly, one o'clock in the afternoon is a bit early for most.

"Everyone at Bungie works incredibly hard," our guide assures us. "And everyone is pretty much responsible for their own part of the game. As you can imagine, there have been a lot of late nights recently and still more to come."

At least the absence of staff members means we get longer to digest the contents of whiteboards and concept art hanging on partitions as we move around. How about this for a *Halo 2* creature you've never heard of before: a Drinol Beast, a sort of hairless, grey monster with one eye – although there are other drawings of it with two eyes so you can't take for granted that it's going to make the final game. And then there's Bungie's twisted sense of humour to take into account. We wouldn't put it past the company to put a few red herrings around the place, just for a laugh. However, one whiteboard does catch our eye, chiefly because it's out of the way and unprepossessing. 'Block 4' is the title, followed by four subheadings: 'Spacestation', 'Flood Lab', 'Forerunner ship', and 'Delta Control'. Just a nugget like this is enough to whip fans into frenzies.

One whiteboard catches our eye. 'Block 4' is the title, followed by 'Spacestation, 'Flood Lab', 'Forerunner ship', and 'Delta Control'

So far, there's little to indicate what makes Bungie special. Can it just be down to trust? The idea of responsibility is key to Parsons: "It's hard to define exactly why Bungie is special. Let's put it this way: the company only recruits the best, and there's very definitely a culture of responsibility here. It makes or breaks them. People work hard for the team but they're also working hard for themselves… they'll have a particular feature to solve or idea they want



Banshee air battles will feature in the larger multiplayer maps, strengthening the sense of scale and drama. A new Covenant craft called the Phantom has yet to be revealed



The honey pot

Bungie's playful approach to marketing has recently been demonstrated in its www.ilovebees.com viral campaign. Although Parsons feigns ignorance on the subject – "We don't get the chance to read the internet," he says roguishly – it's clear from Bungie.net's weekly updates that this isn't the case.

Download the latest trailer of *Halo 2* and towards the conclusion you'll note Bungie's URL alters to www.ilovebees.com for a brief moment. Accessing this unassuming beekeepers' site then provokes a hacked error message that has set many a forum buzzing. Technobabble combined with a countdown clock has incited countless crackpot theories ranging from Microsoft releasing a downloadable multiplayer level of *Halo 2* to Cortana carrying a virus that could devastate Earth. By the time you read this you'll know whether all the fuss was worth it.



to flesh out. Also, the organic way we build the game also encourages creativity."

Parsons is an energetic evangelist for the game and seems genuinely excited about playing it himself. A large room is set aside at Bungie's HQ for an entire day of multiplayer *Halo 2* gaming. Noticeably, Parsons is jumping into any vacated seat, getting stuck in and generally dragging up the averages of those away eating pizza.

We're treated to three new multiplayer levels of *Halo 2*, plus the Zanzibar map first showcased at this year's E3. Although there's a mood of disappointment that there's no singleplayer level on show, it's short lived. No one complains once the headsets go on and the slaying begins. (The headsets are noticeably different, with a higher build quality and adjustable parts so that they fit snugly into even the oddest-shaped ear. They will be released alongside the game.) The three new maps give a good indication of how much Bungie has improved the multiplayer component of *Halo*. It's familiar yet more complex and satisfying. Parsons describes it aptly: "When you pick up *Halo 2* we want people to think of it as an old friend. It has all the same clothes, but a new haircut and a wad of cash in the pocket." Maybe in the UK we're not so impressed by a friend fresh out of the barbers waving a fistful of cash around, but we get the point.

Bungie does let on that the architecture contained in the maps gives a flavour of what's to appear in the game proper. Which is interesting as one arena takes place in what appears to be a large Covenant craft. It's broadly cylindrical, with purple and pink paths twisting around the outer rim and up to an overhead footbridge. It's the smallest of the maps we play and even with just a handful of players it's difficult to move a few paces without meeting a foe face to face.

The second consists of a series of ramps zigzagging their way up to a large square platform; there's also a jump pad that can take you from the lowest level up to the top in an instant. It's a more precarious environment and a couple of Covenant swords ensure that close melee combat is a significant factor. The final map is the largest, boasting a central atrium complete with huge pool and coconut palms. Several passages, rooms, high balconies and alcoves surround this area. The rocket launcher is the most devastating weapon here, and explosive canisters littered around the labyrinthine corridors ensure that one stray bullet or grenade can get you a kill, or killed.

> "When you pick up Halo 2 we want people to think of it as an old friend. It has all the same clothes, but a new haircut and a wad of cash"

In terms of balancing, there appears to be no fatal flaw. The dual-weapon wielding is fantastically cathartic, but the inability to use grenades and the reduced accuracy (pressing both triggers simultaneously causes your aim to move upwards) can be a bitter pill to swallow. Discovering powerful



weapon combinations is half the fun. A charged blast of the Covenant pulse pistol followed by unloading a full clip from the new sub-machinegun into an enemy is absolutely devastating, but just as you're getting cocky a rival will annihilate you with one slice from the plasma sword that has featured so prominently in Bungie's hype.

Noticeably, the shield recharges much quicker than in *Halo*, and the needle gun fires at almost twice the rate. Alterations such as these encourage confrontation rather than camping. On the levels we played weapon sets and game types were locked, but none of the maps became even the slightest bit tedious. A greater emphasis on environmental damage – even the coconuts can be shot to the ground – made for more tactile and engrossing playgrounds to fight in.

In short, despite playing these levels on Slayer over and over again, they felt like a mere taste of what's to come.

One of *Halo*'s greatest strengths was the ability to customise and tweak almost every facet in the multiplayer setup. It's the aspect that's kept it fresh where every other console multiplayer mode has gone stale after a few months. Bungie not only promises that the rich level of customisation seen in *Halo* is to return, but also that completely new game types will be introduced. Parsons believes Oddball will seem tame by comparison.

"We're going to give gamers some crazy shit online," he adds excitedly. "If I have one message, it's get yourself a good router. We're going to support fans by adjusting playlists and keeping them informed about exactly how well they're doing." Bungie hopes to build a community by encouraging people to view a

The Plantronics-manufactured headset is an improvement on the original Xbox Live model. It launches alongside the game





Bungie studio manager Pete Parsons (centre left of photo, in white T-shirt, with hands on hips) claims the company employs only the best. And those willing to do a little dressing up, clearly



breakdown of their stats at its own website. It's a clever way to highlight the brand, sure, but there should be a genuine pleasure derived from poring over your game statistics in fine detail – who you played against, on what map at what time, and cross-referencing with those of rivals.

Only when it comes to balancing does Parsons sound a note of panic: "It's a mammoth job, and every time I look at the calendar that November release date jumps out." Changing to dual-weapon wielding is one thing, but introducing vehicle damage must have been an agonising decision. "Oh, it was, but I think we made the right choice. You know, when you have a game and one person is using a ghost as a lawnmower for the entire match it can get annoying. You now have to use vehicles much more tactically and being able to board them adds yet another dimension."

Although the office is less than half-empty during our visit (it's also a Saturday) Parsons is keen to stress how much work is going in to the game during the final phase: "It's flat out and people are putting in very long days. Everyone is fully committed to the game." Parsons is not your typical PR man, as his enthusiasm to play the game testifies. "When we finish we're all going to take a long nap," he concludes. "We'll have some kind of party, but, actually, we're looking forward to playing online with gamers."

We went to Bungie hoping to discover what made it special. Cue visions of creative meetings held in rooms lined with beanbags, or conversely, an authoritarian regime complete with workers' cells and a strict chain of command. But, prosaic as it sounds, Bungie, despite the absence of employees during the visit, is just like any every other developer.

Except every other developer wasn't responsible for *Halo*.

But is Bungie in danger of being known for one game alone? "No way," Parsons finishes adamantly. Does it have other games in development? "You just wait and see."

"When we finish we'll have a long nap and then some kind of party, but, actually, we're looking forward to playing online with gamers"

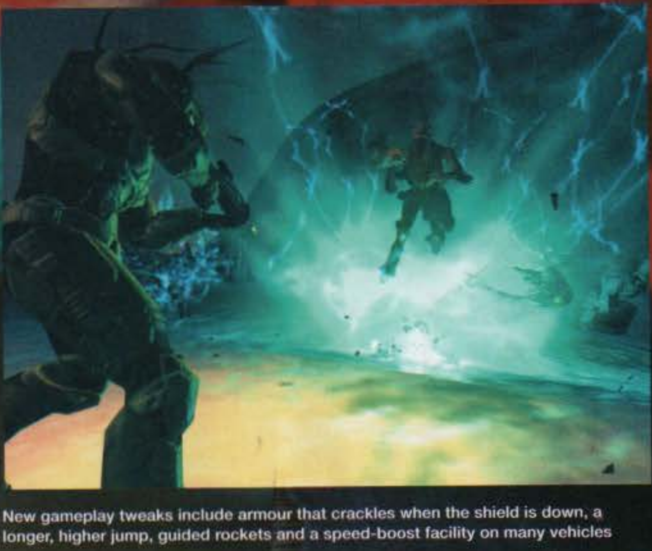


All *Halo*'s vehicles return in the new multiplayer arenas, but now they perish under intense fire. Boarding craft and knocking pilots out of their seats will become a beloved tactic





Judging by this image, the flamethrower, cut from *Halo* towards the end of development, could make it into the sequel. However, it has not been present during the game's beta



New gameplay tweaks include armour that crackles when the shield is down, a longer, higher jump, guided rockets and a speed-boost facility on many vehicles

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Splinter Cell Chaos Theory, Sam Fisher's third mission, is his most ambitious yet. We made our way across to Canada to find out how Ubisoft plans to substantially evolve the series



There is usually a moment on a press trip, typically just after you first enter your hotel room after a transatlantic flight, when you wonder whether the game you've come to see is worth the countless miles travelled. This time, however, there's no such instant of contemplation because the answer is to be found lying on the room's desk. Ubisoft has kindly arranged for a *Splinter Cell* 'goodie bag' to be delivered but, unexpectedly, it's the hotel directory next to it that has boosted our jetlagged confidence regarding the quality of Sam Fisher's latest mission. In it, the hotel's general manager has personally signed the introductory note – twice, in fact, given that the guide is in both French and English. And that's for each of the hotel's 258 rooms.

This level of attention to detail extends beyond Montreal's hotels and, more relevantly, has been particularly characteristic of recent projects to emerge from Ubisoft's Canadian operation. Established in 1997, Ubisoft Montreal now houses 900 employees in 150,000 sq ft arranged over three vast labyrinthine floors of an old textiles factory. It is, it proudly boasts, the world's second largest development studio. It has its own gym, several recreational areas, and each of its kitchen units comprises nine microwave ovens and three US-sized fridges to cater for its ostensibly committed staff.

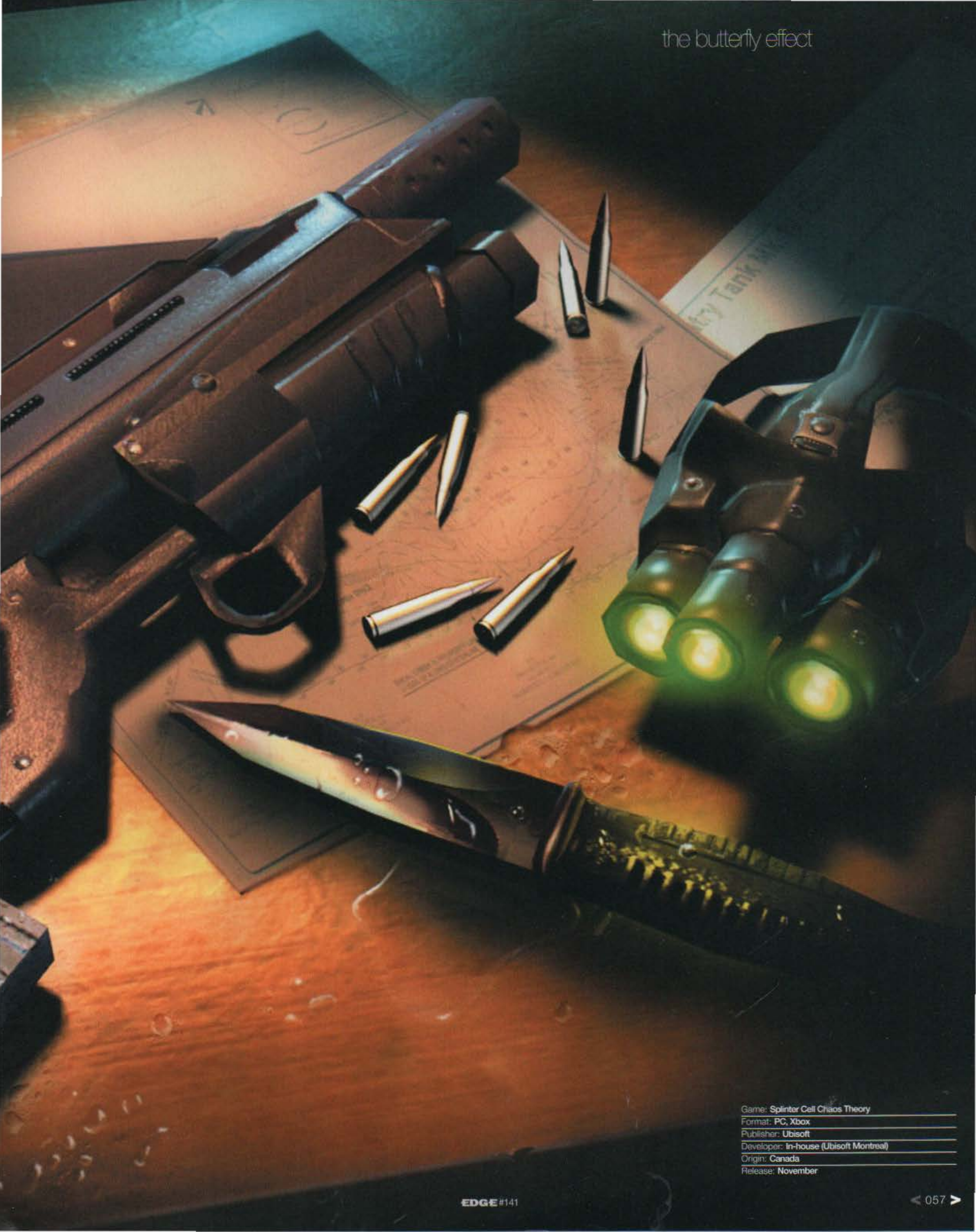
One group of employees that has certainly been making regular use of the culinary facilities since the autumn of 2002 is the original *Splinter Cell* team. (If you're wondering, *Pandora Tomorrow* was co-developed in Shanghai and Montreal, with the Canadian side of the equation providing a dedicated team to only look after that game's multiplayer aspect – a structure it has again employed (see 'Togetherness'). Currently with a headcount of around 150, it's Ubisoft's largest and a convincing indication of the publisher's commitment to the third instalment in its popular stealth franchise. For *Chaos Theory*, the company is addressing issues both press and public had regarding the previous two iterations, while attempting to push the concept of stealth further and evolving the *Splinter Cell* universe by enhancing the player experience.

"One of our ambitions was to make this game a little more massmarket, to get a larger audience by fixing all the frustrations we had in the [first] game," says producer **Mathieu Ferland**, "but also to support the hardcore gamer with the non-linear structure, with all the secondary objectives and opportunity objectives and bonus objectives and all the little details they'll discover when playing the game."

> For Chaos Theory, Ubisoft is addressing issues while attempting to push the concept of stealth further and evolving the Splinter Cell universe

They may sound unconnected, but these elements are related to one another, working together to remove the linear nature so criticised of *Splinter Cell* (which, it emerges during our trip, originally included non-linear aspects that were removed for reasons unknown).

Clint Hocking, creative director, scriptwriter and lead level designer, explains *Chaos Theory*'s approach: "We really wanted to have what I call controlled non-linearity or semi-open topology. The world is open and you can go in any direction at any time but what we have is 'the 80 per cent path'. This concept means



Game: **Splinter Cell Chaos Theory**
Format: **PC, Xbox**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **In-house (Ubisoft Montreal)**
Origin: **Canada**
Release: **November**



Fisher now feels connected to the environment, with a realistic stopping ability and his feet firmly on the ground – not easy to achieve; Montreal claims to be the first developer to have realised this

that the level designer builds the map in accordance with the script and with the design objectives of the game, and he plans out these ten or 12 areas and how they're topologically interconnected. He plans the path he wants the player to take, and this is the path he focuses most on. If there are other paths available, that's fine, but we need to make sure that the path that the designer designs and spends the lion's share of his effort on is the path that 80 per cent of the players take. The non-linear paths are still there, but they are really intended more for the hardcore players, for the repeat players to add replay value."

One particular example, a Tokyo bath house brimming with guards, allows two multiple-path system. Players can make decisions about game flow, but by implementing a series of objectives in addition to the multi-path approach the developer can, to a certain extent, still control the player's actions. While primary and secondary objectives are obviously mission-specific, opportunity objectives take the form of, say, planting bugs on six telephones – they're not heavily story focused but serve as a balancing and guidance tool for the developer to invite gamers into most of the map's areas. Similarly, bonus objectives reward the meticulous player who is prepared to explore the environment in minute detail. One interesting addition is the inclusion of

"Sam now carries a shotgun for those specific sequences where there's lots of firefights, and the fight sequences are much more attractive"

main routes through (with the occasional sub-path thrown in) and while both encourage Fisher's trademark considered stealth infiltration method, it's promising to be able to test the developer's claims that the game can now also be played in more conspicuous fashion. "Just because we're encouraging and rewarding the player to play stealthily doesn't mean the game doesn't support action," Ferland offers. "Sam now carries a shotgun for those specific sequences where there's lots of firefights, and we've been developing the AI so the fight sequences are much more attractive and relevant."

More on the AI in a moment. Levels are now more structurally complex and offer a 'fallback' objectives, which only come into effect once the mission has gone wrong and serve as a way of reducing the number of what previously would have resulted in game-over situations.

New intelligence

Your opponents, on the other hand, will be looking to increase such circumstances. The AI has been completely rewritten and now uses navigation meshes rather than navigation points of *SC1*. In addition, NPCs benefit from increased environmental awareness including mirror and shadow detection, contextual search animations (such as looking over a railing) and memory, rather than going back to an 'idle' mode

TOGETHERNESS

A particularly promising inclusion in *Chaos Theory* is the twoplayer cooperative game (on or offline) that has been worked on by a separate team at Ubisoft Montreal since February. The limited development time has resulted in only four maps being offered, although, if the mode proves popular, expect more via download. "There's no way that it was possible to recycle the singleplayer maps," explains associate producer **Stephane Roy**. "The designers didn't have it in their minds that it was for two players, so that's why my team is working uniquely on that – and it makes a difference. Occasionally in coop titles you get the feeling that they've just added another character but it's the same architecture and the same environment. I guarantee that with the maps we've created you cannot finish it alone – you must be with your friend."

The game essentially plays the same as in singleplayer but with the addition of coop moves (such as throwing your colleague over an infra-red beam, climbing up the side of a building, standing on his shoulders while shooting over a wall) and they are the aspect Roy is proudest of: "We give you the feeling that you are doing something special, that you have access to some areas that you are not supposed to. It's because of these moves that the game and level designers can design some very nice structures. Tons of new possibilities exist."

In play, coordinating strategies offer an attractive new dynamic on the *Splinter Cell* gameplay although admittedly the coop moves, while simple in their one-button execution, prove a little cumbersome in terms of set-up and player placement. But a little practice should certainly oil the procedure and the potential for this mode remains thoroughly exciting.







The Montreal-based team is working hard on audio: sound propagation, volumetric sourcing, sound masking and better ambient effects make full use of the game's 5.1 mix





In addition to his usual spectacular array of gadgets, Fisher now carries a knife, allowing for the display of the game's ragdoll physics model in some of the new close-quarter combat moves

after a set time period. They can perform complex tasks such as teaming up with a fellow NPC to perform searches (and notice if the other goes missing), flanking, and converging around a specific object to communicate with one another.

Furthermore, the developer has included the notion of stress levels, which depend on the number, and nature, of stimuli. "We're thinking that it's very important that the NPC cares about their life," expands lead programmer **Dany Lepage**. "Of course, if they care about their life they're going to be behind cover very often because they're not going to stay in the open and that's going to [make it] difficult for you to kill them." However, Lepage is keen to point out that the team has ways of ensuring the AI isn't so clever as to make the game frustratingly difficult, such as limiting their accuracy and cone of vision: "I think they're going to be much more interesting opponents. You're going to have to think a lot more to get the same result because the behaviour is going to be different depending on what you do – they're going to have a strategy that will adapt quickly to what you're doing and you'll need to use something different to get rid of them." To prove the point, Lepage demonstrates a firefight between Fisher and a soldier who appears impressively sharp in his use of surroundings for cover. In practice, we find the enemy's perception level to be a little overenthusiastic, with the slightest look around a corner resulting in immediate detection, but the team readily admits there is still fine-tuning to be done.

Which seems like an appropriate time to leave them to it. In terms of atmosphere (the combined result of standard-setting animation, graphics, audio and AI, plus a novel coop mode), *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* is a determined leap forward for the franchise and, potentially, the stealth genre as a whole. It's not quite there yet, but come November you'd expect the detail-obsessed Ubisoft Montreal to deliver something special.





MEMORABLE MOMENTS

Chaos Theory feels darker than previous *Splinter Cell* games. It's a lot to do with the team's approach. "We don't want to push the realism any further than we did, but we did want to up the emotional stakes in the game. One of the ways to do that is to add a bit of an edge to it," Hocking says. This emotional connection centres on the notion of tension, arguably the main emotional experience in a stealth game. As tension within a stealth dynamic is inherently linked to enemy proximity, the team has engineered the game both in terms of objectives and AI behaviour to deliver such situations, while also providing a new close-range attack system.

Equally, the storytelling element has undergone a revision. A dynamic dialogue system takes into account previous events and player choices (necessary given the game's non-linear leanings) and the use of in-game cut-scenes has been removed and replaced by what the developer is terming 'memorable moments'. Developed with a Hollywood specialist, these incidents aim to inject drama into the game while allowing the player to maintain camera control and thus promote a more involving experience. "We're trying to look for ways to create the emotions that you feel when you experience traditional drama," says Hocking.

One example includes the shadow of a man undergoing electric-shock torture being projected on to a wall you approach early on in the level which, when combined with game's excellent audio quality, leaves little to the imagination. Hocking again: "I think it's more challenging and again much riskier to invite the player to feel something dramatically and emotionally compelling than it is to just yank away the camera and force him to watch it."





Fisher's revised arsenal allows inventive players more freedom when it comes to negotiating levels – you can disable a guard by discharging an electrical blast into the water puddle he's standing in

May contain small parts

Lego Star Wars, from startup publisher Giant Entertainment, is blending two extraordinarily beloved entertainment universes into something new...



To begin, a line of Lego trivia. The word Lego comes from the Danish 'Leg Godt', meaning to play well. That is the Lego philosophy – playing well – and that confident quality oozes from almost everything the Danish manufacturer has branded since its inception. To continue, a cheap shot. Lego videogames have not (traditionally) played well. Star Wars games, too, have forged an unenviable reputation recently, apart from a certain RPG. So, from an **Edge** reader's point of view at least, *Lego Star Wars* finds itself in a peculiar situation from the start: two powerful licences, each theoretically tailor made for videogames, each a blessing and each a curse.

It's likely, then, that that an **Edge** reader will have come to this part of the magazine last of all, regardless of how much they've loved Lego, loved Lucas. Why blame them? What could they expect from a journey through the first three films that, according to the developer's mission statement, has been made for children? It's not for them, right? **Jonathan Smith**, development director at the game's publisher, Giant Entertainment, answers without missing a beat. "You're talking about a





















Lego 'studs' are enormously evocative, and they work well as an interaction signifier. It's hard to look at the bigger ships without wanting to prise apart the bricks and rebuild

Game: **Lego Star Wars**
Format: **PC, PS2, Xbox**
Publisher: **Giant Ent.**
Developer: **Traveller's Tales**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **2005**



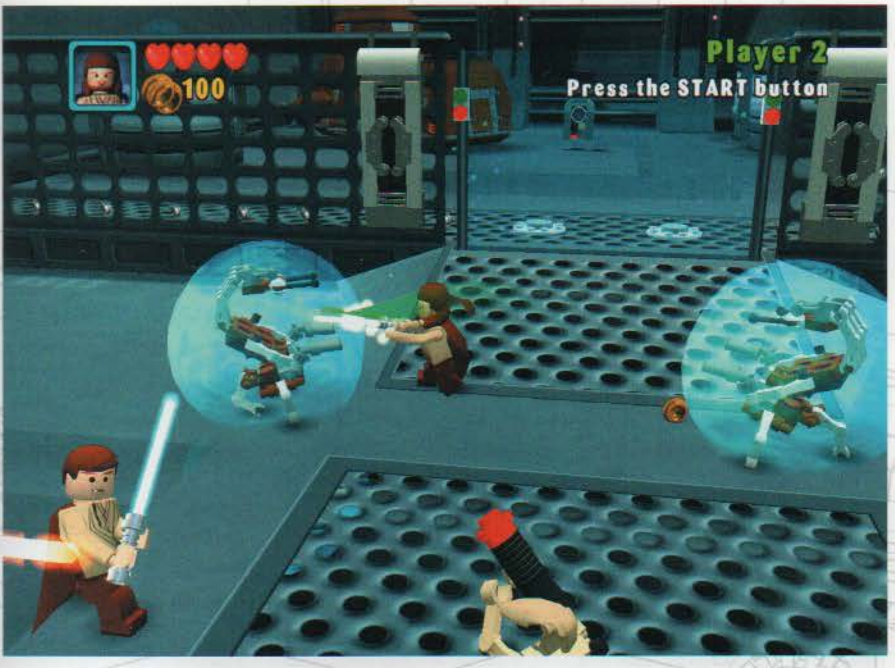
By using the force (mapped to circle on the PS2 pad) Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon can take Lego objects and reconstruct them. The new structures may give be important to progress, or simply give access to power-ups or extra areas

hardcore, seen-it-all-before gamer? This is *exactly* what they want. They *haven't* seen it before." Interesting. Just suppose he's right.

You – you – may not have seen *Lego Star Wars* before in a very literal sense, either. The game had a low-key public unveiling at the San Diego comic convention at the end of July to no small amount of surprise and excitement, the hype snowball taking its first few tumbles down the mountainside. Recounting all the major events in the modern trilogy, and due for release just before 2005's Revenge Of The Sith, superficially it's a straightforward game – a series of thirdperson fixed-camera adventures through landmark set-pieces, instantly recognisable environments populated with heart-warming lego structures, circular studs and the tiny minifig Star Wars characters.

Investigate further, though, and the game's linear handholding melts away, replaced by a freeform friendliness that encourages exploration and experimentation. While the levels are compact from start to finish, the idea is that players who want to spend more time playing in the environments are provided with enough toys to play with. Lego pieces act as interaction signifiers within the playfield – Jedi can attempt to manipulate Lego bricks with the force or smash things with their sabers; robots will pull









Construction complete



The ship models in *Lego Star Wars* are recreations of their Lego kit counterparts. Better than that, they're constructed out of virtual versions of single separately built bricks, meaning Traveller's Tales has essentially turned Maya into an infinitely large Lego kit. "It makes it building models a lot easier," explains lead artist **James Cunliffe**. "Slave-1, to build, is an afternoon. Building a new spaceship out of regular polygons would take a whole lot longer." Most of the ships are built out of similar bricks, since reusing odd pieces from previous kits is a source of pride in the Lego design community. You'll find the wing panel from one ship might have had a previous life as a spoiler on an F1 car, and that's a technique that Cunliffe is continuing in the videogame's new Lego creations. "One of the droids I built this week has a telephone that are his eye sockets, effectively," he explains. Convergence taken to extremes, that.

The point is that if it's made from Lego you can play with it. And when you realise that, you realise what's fundamentally different about this Lego game

and push Lego levers; and royal guards will shoot the cutest laser pistols ever, or use grappling hooks to reach higher platforms. There are many more characters and many more ways of manipulating the environment, but the point is that if it's made from Lego you can play with it. And when you realise that, you realise what's fundamentally different about *this* Lego game. It's about transferring the Leg Godt philosophy into videogaming, not taking a videogame and colouring it with bricks.

Smith explains how that concept came about: "It started with the idea that Lego could make a great computer game. There was something in that fantastic experience of playing with Lego that we all know about, that could be brought to the world of videogames that we all love. That could match. That could create something new – that could draw on what was in Lego, but take it into a new place."

But why bring Star Wars into it? "The thing with Star Wars meant that we could bring the world's favourite characters into that idea, and create something that would be extremely accessible, attractive, exciting. Lego's range of Star Wars play materials has been one of the most successful ranges of toys for the Lego toy company. Much loved by us, much loved by everyone we know, by many millions of people throughout the world. So the next question was what would the *Lego Star Wars* game be? What are all these great vehicles, all these great characters, scenes from movies that we live out when we play with the toys, what would that be like in a videogame?"

So Lego brings the structure and Star Wars brings the universe. Interestingly, though, just as Lego's designers have been allowed to experiment with the vehicles in the universe themselves – check the back of any Star Wars Lego set and you'll find other, non-Lucas creations that can be built with the same pieces – so *Lego Star Wars* turns the cinematic story into a playset. As players progress through the game they unlock characters, and these characters can be taken back into previous scenes. By combining their unique skills with those of the characters already present in the level it's possible to reach new areas in a gameplay twist that may remind some of *The Lost Vikings* on a grander scale.



Slice slice, baby



Star Wars wouldn't be Star Wars without some saber slicing and laser swooshing, and *Lego Star Wars* doesn't shy away from either. Jedi have lightsabers with which they can perform simple, single-button combos, each of the fighters having their own particular moveset. Holding down the attack button will block, while laser blasts can be reflecting back at opponents with well-timed swipes. Other player characters have different methods of attacking their opponents, including R2D2's strangely satisfying ability to disable droids. "I think that as soon as you pick it up it has immediate playability," says Pardon.



Jango Fett is one of the developers' favourite characters. Like the rest of *Lego Star Wars'* cast, he's beautifully animated – watch his tiny body recoil in mid air as he hovers and fires his pistols, or the little flourishes as he spins

Also of note is the 'drop in, drop out' twoplayer dynamic, which allows a second player to enter or leave the action on a whim. There are always between two and six possible player characters on screen, and pressing Start drops player two into one of their bodies. If they'd rather play a different part they can approach their choice of host and transfer their spirit with the triangle button. The same goes for player one, of course, which is how they can solve the multi-character multi-skill puzzles. The AI of the rest of the party is smart enough but it's essentially static, not progressive – it will do the minimum required to keep itself alive, and shadow your progress through the level intuitively, but it won't solve puzzles or rout enemies.

With such a strong emphasis on a wide range of characters, much thought was put into how the instantly recognisable Lego minifigures were to be recreated in a game. Initially animated in a similar fashion to the comedic (funny-cos-they're-rubbish) Lego stop-motion videos that pop up across the internet from time to time, Traveller's Tales soon decided on something more organic. "It was pretty obvious we weren't really going to be able to stick with plastic," explains **Jeremy Pardon**, *Lego Star Wars'* lead animator. "That worked better, creating characters rather than just copying the minifigs. I mean, there were technical problems anyway – the plastic was built to work and function in a certain way, which as a character it doesn't necessarily do. A good example is if you open their legs, they actually have something in the middle, and it starts to look… ummm…"

Lego Star Wars' minifigs have a sort of flexibility that's absent from the figures on which they're based, knee joints flexing as if the legs were made of soft rubber, plastic hairstyles flopping comically with their owners' motion. The painted-on facial expressions are beautifully animated, too. If other Lego games have shown how Lego would look if animated with Thunderbirds-style strings, this is Lego done by Pixar, flexible and emotive, almost inevitable when you consider that the team's last game was *Finding Nemo*.

"Actually, when we started, we hadn't even finished *Nemo*, had we?" grins Pardon. "And we were doing the first demo of the game. My producer on *Nemo* wasn't very happy. There were a few weeks left on that project, just kinda fixing bugs and stuff, but we were all so excited at the new project, at the prospect of being able to play with Lego basically, that we just cracked on and built… well, we had half a dozen characters, a speeder bike, stormtroopers. Helped by lots of Lego."

How did the Lego designers react when they first saw their creations moving? Smith interrupts. "They were just blown away, everyone, right from the start, right from the first minifigure they saw move around. Everyone just said: 'That is 100 per cent right'." Was that because they had pretty low expectations? "They had no expectations. None whatsoever, because they didn't know what we were going to do. At all.

"But the results were spectacular, and proved what we'd been hoping for: that these characters could come to life as videogame characters. That the world in the imagination of a child or adult – becoming a child for a moment as they play with the

If other Lego games have shown how Lego would look if animated with Thunderbirds-style strings, this is Lego done by Pixar, flexible and emotive





It's not all platforms and puzzling – here, one of the movies' key sequences is recreated as a linear shooter, while the famous pod racing also has a Lego equivalent



Lego and live out that story – could come to life in a really cool way."

If you want an illustration of exactly how cool that cool way is, take the short, sharp cut-scenes. Linking the action, they compress Lucas's newly verbose storytelling into tiny, expression-filled silent movie-style bulletins. At the end of Episode One – and this is spoiler territory for those who've been living in a hole for five years, so beware – Darth Maul's final, fatal fight with Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan is jammed into 20 seconds of supercute lightsaber dancing. When Maul falls, split asunder at the waist into his two minifig parts just as a real Lego minifig would, you can see just how well they've captured the essence from both universes – the joy from one, the character from the other – and have created a third.

Or, as Smith explains, it's about ignoring theoretical convention and returning to Leg Godt: "If this was a mission to clone those plastic toys and represent them in a videogame, we would have all kinds of challenges from a technical perspective, to try and make that fun. But the mission, right from the start, was to say: 'What's the game of Star Wars Lego going to be like? What, in that currently existing plastic world, can we draw upon to make that game?' But if new stuff needs to be created to bring characters to life in this imaginative world, we are at liberty to make those changes. The Lego ethos is bigger than any one particular representation."

That's difficult to disagree with. But how will Giant persuade **Edge** readers that this is the one? That this is really, actually, genuinely going to play well? Smith's three-stage answer is simple. Stage one: "We would show it to them." Stage two: "And they would play it." Stage three: "And they would enjoy it."

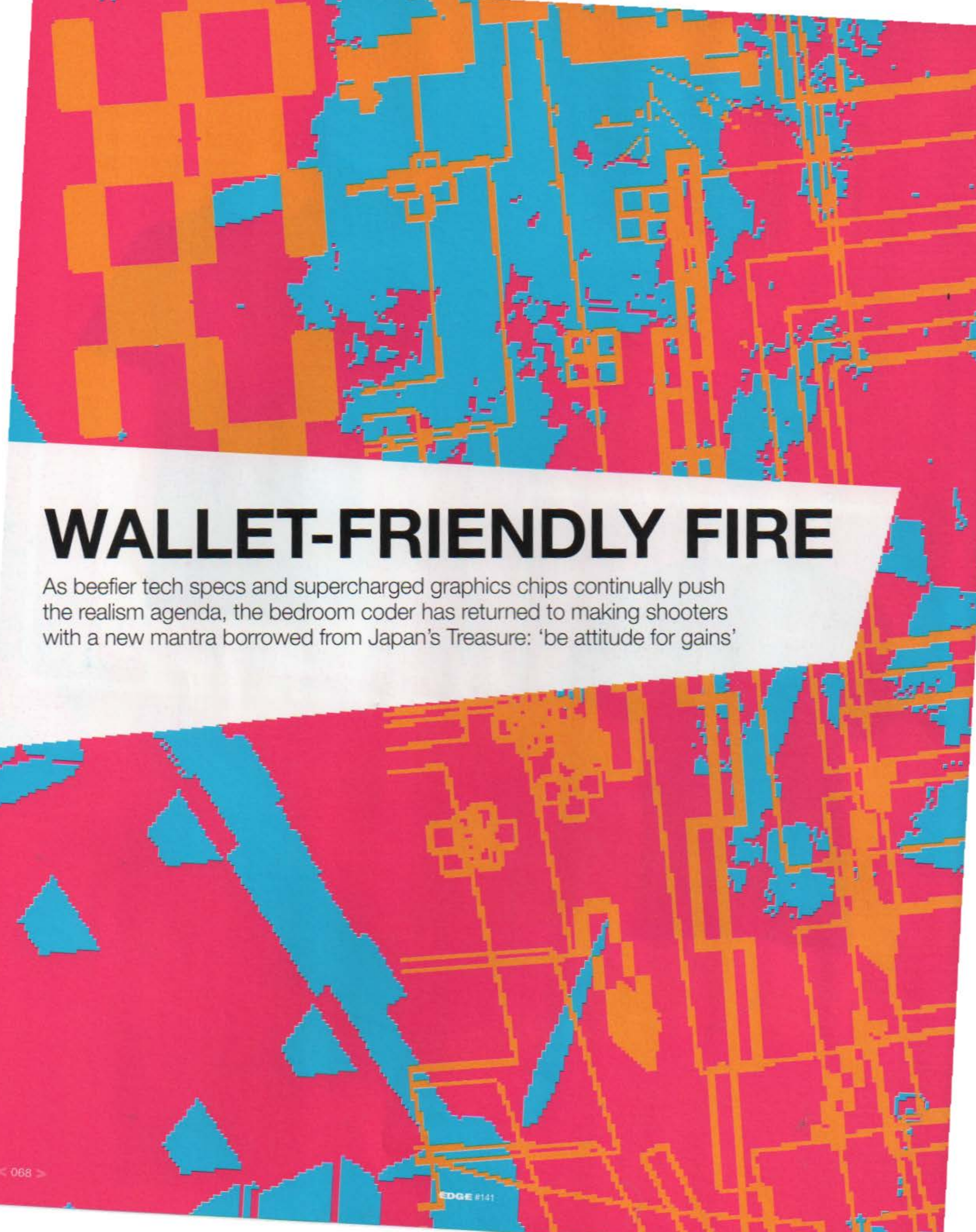
Right now, we've got no reason to suppose he's wrong.







From left: Giant Entertainment's managing director Tom Stone, development director Jonathan Smith, and Loz Doyle, producer on *Lego Star Wars*



WALLET-FRIENDLY FIRE

As beefier tech specs and supercharged graphics chips continually push the realism agenda, the bedroom coder has returned to making shooters with a new mantra borrowed from Japan's Treasure: 'be attitude for gains'

Listen to the *Doom 3* previews: 'Lifelike facial expressions'; 'Some of the most realistic-looking realtime rendered characters'. And here's the first question put to *Half-Life 2*'s developers during a recent online chat: "Will the game feature *Soldier Of Fortune*-style realistic damage?"

Even something as subversively thrilling as *Burnout 3* was initially lauded for its looks over its content. While there's an undeniable thrill in wandering around a world that, more or less, looks and behaves like the one you're used to, what happened to abstract gaming? Plotless, pointless action that looks distinctive and where feel – and atmosphere – is all.

It's been pushed underground, into a shooter scene which has transcended its shaky shareware origins and matured into a sturdy subculture. The small, but perfectly formed, games that emerge – particularly from the Japanese Doujin (freeware) stables – are potent hits of pure game-buzz. An ideal antidote to much of the over-egged flab being flogged on the high street.

As ever, it's thank you Mr Internet. As broadband's increased availability has expanded the scope for multimedia downloading, spare-time coders can now design a game, host a demo on some

cheaply acquired web space and, with a link to an online payment company, sell a complete, full-price version – all without the permission of publisher superpowers.

And, while the internet has its share of weirdy Flash games and hack-job puzzlers, it's shoot 'em ups that tend to dominate. "Shooters are a quick thing to develop," says **Matt Verran** of Hermit Games (author of *Super Mario-Pac* and *Asteroids/Ikaruga* hybrid *'Troid*). "You just put a sprite on-screen, get it moving around, add some bullets, something for the bullets to hit, and you have a shoot 'em up. It's also very easy to change gameplay radically by just tweaking a small thing. You have plenty of control over what you can force the player to do – without complex physics or AI or anything."

It's a punk-style reaction to the slick, but often empty and over-complex, prog rock of commercial games. Learn your basic three-chord/get-a-sprite-on-screen technique, and then form a band/design a shooter. Stepping outside the financial comfort zone provided by big publishers offers a key advantage: creative freedom. Many of the higher-profile internet shooters were designed by coders disillusioned with designing games to some kind of market specification.

Mike Michael of PomPom Games (*Mutant Storm*, *Space Tripper*) is an ex-employee of Argonaut Software. "It wasn't much fun," he says. "You have to keep going off on strange tangents in order to accommodate a particular bit of technology. Commercial games have become more about technology and less about the game. With *Space Tripper*, we had a vision at the start that was the same halfway through and at the end. That doesn't happen in the commercial sector. Decisions are often made far away from the development heart."



Space Tripper (7/10, E97): 'an essay in balance' and 'instinctive and addictive'

JAPANESE

WARNING FOREVER

www18.big.or.jp/~hikoza/Prod



Boss-rush bliss. A beautiful-looking vertical shooter with a vector-ish vibe. Takes the standard formula and strips out the tiresome business of shooting lots of little enemies before you get a go at the big boss. A procession of bigger, badder, increasingly tooled-up bosses. No more, no less. While other shooters treat bosses as a convention, *Warning Forever* revels in them.

CHO REN SHA 68K

www2.tky.3web.ne.jp/~yosshin



Vertical shmups are abundant, but this is a standout, with stylised 8bit looks concealing modern gameplay. Instead of bombarding you with power-ups, it lets you modify your style of play by offering a choice of three (weapon power-up, extra bomb, shield).

PERFECT CHERRY BLOSSOM

www16.big.or.jp/~zun/html/th07.html



The best of the out-and-out bullet-hell shmups (or 'curtain shooters'). The slightly frilly pinkness ('Girls do their best now... please watch warmly until it is ready') is all a front. *PCB* is steely, tough, and a slick, professional job that wouldn't look out of place on DC or PS2.

BULLET PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

user.ecc.u-tokyo.ac.jp/~s31552/wp/bpo



An enchanting mix of *Vib Ribbon* and shooter, the game devises geometric, 'buzz'-able bullet patterns depending on the rhythm and pace of the mp3s you tell it to follow. It's a shmup, but it feels like an interactive WinAmp visualisation.

"YOU PUT A SPRITE ON-SCREEN, GET IT MOVING AROUND, ADD BULLETS, SOMETHING FOR THEM TO HIT, AND YOU HAVE A SHOOTER"

Like most homebrew shooter designers, Michael's design logic is based on trying to ape the feel of other games that he loves; to figure out what they're doing right and then rework it his own way: "With *Space Tripper*, we didn't do any market research or anything like that. I just wanted to write a game that was trying to be as good as something timeless like *Defender*. I wanted to achieve a certain level of pain – where you're not even sure that you're having fun any more. I've only ever got that from shoot 'em ups."

There's a big pleasure in stripping away stifling management tiers and taking responsibility for something yourself. It's a theme that carries over to good shooter gameplay: if it all goes wrong, at least you can say: 'That was my fault. I'll do better, next time'. As Verran says: "I don't want to compromise my idea of what the game should be like. I find it more fun to do everything myself and if it doesn't work out, it's all my fault".

If you really want to get your game out there, then you might consider getting involved with one of the companies acting like indie music labels, which are willing to accommodate less mainstream games and take on the hassle and overheads in return for a profit cut. Mind those seductive advances, though…

Rights of man

On the strength of a demo of his ace side-scroller, *Platypus*, **Anthony Flack** sold the rights to Idigicon (then Guildhall Leisure) for £1,500. He thought it was a good deal, given that the full version probably wouldn't take that long to finish. "It took 18 gruelling months," says Flack. "When the game was released into the shops, it was well received, but I don't think Idigicon had anything more in mind for it than to prop up the bottom of the bargain bin."

Flack later passed on the rights to an online company who tweaked and repositioned it, the game become a big hit on download site RealArcade (www.realarcade.com). "Everyone involved has made a good deal of money off the game," says Flack. "Apart from

SCORE SOLDIER

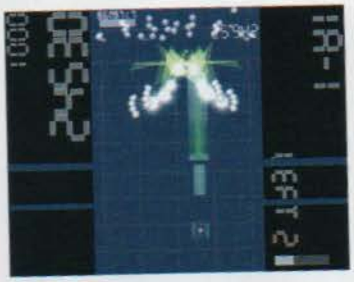
homepage2.nifty.com/isshiki/prog_win_game.html



A moreish shooter from the wonderfully named Hello World Project. Collect red and blue capsules to power up your ship; bag bonuses for destroying multiples of 100 enemies. A bit easy, maybe, but pure, abstract and relentless.

RROOTAGE

www.asahi-net.or.jp/~cs8k-cyu/index_e.html



Kenta Cho has designed plenty of shooters worth investigating, including *Tumiki Fighters*, *Parsec47* and *Noiz2sa*. But *rRootage* is the most accomplished; certainly the one most influenced by commercial shmups. Four different modes based on individual shooter styles (*Psyvariar*'s 'buzz' system, *Ikaruga*'s chaining, *Giga Wing*'s bullet-absorb and the standard shoot-everything-and-dodge-bullets mode). The Mac versions of *Noiz2sa* and *rRootage* are spot on.

EVERY EXTEND

nagoya.cool.ne.jp/o_mega/product/e2.html



Another mini-innovator that poses the perplexing question: 'One day, suddenly you receive 12 UCHU-guided bombs. What do you do?' Answer: blow yourself up and take the bad guys with you. *Psyvariar* and *Shikigami No Shiro* have their 'buzz' system, *Every Extend* goes further and makes suicide painless.

WESTERN

CRAZYGAME.EXE

s87336291.onlinehome.us/crazygame.exe



A compulsive little curio that takes bullet dodging to its purest extreme. The premise couldn't be simpler: how long can you stay alive on a single, non-scrolling screen full of multi-directional bullets? It probably took about ten minutes to write, perfectly illustrating the point about shmup principles being the most accessible to novice DIY coders.

GALSHELL: BLOOD RED SKIES

marimo.sakura.ne.jp/~trapped/bacurec



Aaand in the bloody-mindedly non-commercial corner… this is a pathologically Giger-inspired horizontal shooter with plenty of visceral, Freudian ickiness. Clunky, but certainly a change from zappy lasers and sterile ships.

me. But I'm not bitter. I signed the contract, no one did anything illegal. But I learned a big lesson – KEEP the rights."

Iain McLeod, author of psycho psychedelic shooter *Spheres Of Chaos*, agrees: "Do online sales yourself. With a simple payment processing company, you'll get 80 per cent of the sale price, and not the 25 per cent you'd get if you signed everything over to a publisher. Shooters are perfect for this format, because they're easy to sell in bite-sized chunks. They tend to be quick, small downloads with instant accessibility and gameplay that requires learning a few simple skills, with the game getting harder and harder and taxing those skills more and more.

"Puzzlers only appeal to specific tastes and platform games tend to be badly structured – you keep going through the same levels over and over to get to the one difficult level where you keep getting killed."

Fire sale

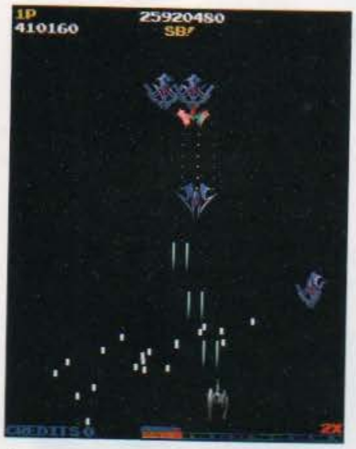
So, why is it so hard to translate such pure gameplay into something more broadly sellable?

"It's the industry's obsession with technology," says Michael. "It reminds me of the car business. As we get better and better technology and faster, more technically impressive cars, more people believe that there's no need to build simpler, smaller cars. The love for our art has gone from this industry. In film and music, the bigger boys are still interested in innovation. But all we want to do is stick to this mediocre, formula approach. It reminds you of why it's still an immature industry."

There's also an aspect of self-fulfiling prophecy. Keep feeding consumers familiar, convincingly rendered worlds and, eventually, they'll lose all taste for anything 'different' altogether. The benchmark for this is still *Rez* – a brilliantly realised game that failed to make any commercial impact. The message to publishers: consumers don't want weirdy, blasty experimentation, they want comfort.

DEADEYE

www.wayoftherodent.com/deadeye_teaser.htm



A more wave-based 2D shooter with a strong old-school coin-op sensibility (*Phoenix*, *Galaxian*). The 'risky!' concept (shooting enemies when they're close to your ship) and bullet-absorb feature takes plenty of cues from Japanese shmup principles.

STRAYFIRE

www.gradientstudios.com/strayfire/gamedownloads.html



Decidedly Japophilic vertical shmup from Gradient Studios. Superb, commercial-quality graphics – including parallax, *Ikaruga*-inspired interactive backdrops.

WARBLADE

www.warblade.as



Based on the celebrated Amiga game *Deluxe Galaga* (and by the same author), *Warblade* is a solid enough PC update which packs in the variety but still suffers from the action-breaking business of using tokens to buy power-ups.

BUGATRON

www.retro64.com/bugatron.asp



An even purer 16bit-style shooter. Stylistically similar to *Space Birdz*, but more inspired by *Galaga* than *Phoenix*. Plenty of character and humour, with some inventive levels and – best of all – good, old-fashioned power-ups.

MUTANT STORM

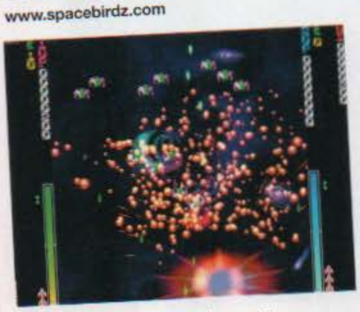
www.pompom.org.uk



PomPom's stuff can feel a teeny bit over-produced, but there's still masses of playability and longevity in these sumptuous *Defender*/*Robotron*-inspired blasters. Again, extra backslaps for acknowledging the Mac.

SPACE BIRDZ

www.spacebirdz.com



A more successful, Amiga-hungover wave-based shooter. Glossier and better looking than *Warblade* and more immediate. Works well as a straight remake of *Phoenix*, but seasons the formula with its own ideas.



ABA Games' *Parsec47* invites you to 'defeat retro enemies modernly'. Just don't blink

Since *Rez* dared to be different, shooter design has scaled back a little – even in Japan – and the Doujin shooters reflect this, preferring to sprinkle in their own little stealth-tweaks and riffs on familiar formulae (*Warning Forever*'s boss-rush, *rRootage*'s cheerful lifts from *Giga Wing*, *Ikaruga* and *Psyvariar*).

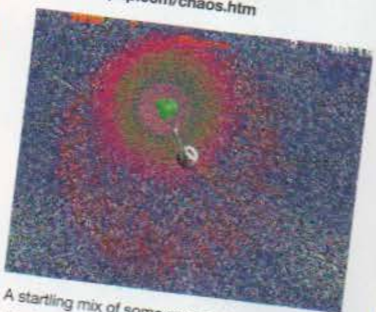
A refreshing element of the home-grown shooter explosion is how, for a change, cultural influences are flowing from east to west. On top of the impact of commercial shooters (Verran claims *'Troid* was 'subconsciously' influenced by *Ikaruga*), the Doujin games are busy making the little leaps in innovation that leak through to western DIY designers. Shooters may be marginalised, but the creative world they live in is tightly knit, and one in which the games take their cues from each other.

It's through a seemingly instinctive affinity with ultra-complex 'bullet hell' shooters that Japanese gaming culture has been viewed as more 'hardcore'. The issue of difficulty never used to be a problem in the arcade era. It was a logical design factor: a machine wouldn't make much money if it was too easy. But, as commercial shooter culture gets more insular, it's in danger of becoming inbred and appealing only to highly skilled players. This is where the homebrew designers step in – twisting and toning down and providing a similarly challenging experience without the publisher fear factor of convincing gamers to pay for something that's 'too hard'. *Gradius V*'s cut-scenes may pay lip service to the mainstream, but the game itself is as uncompromising as ever.

SHOOTERS MAY BE MARGINALISED, BUT THE CREATIVE WORLD THEY LIVE IN IS TIGHTLY KNIT, AND GAMES TAKE CUES FROM EACH OTHER

SPHERES OF CHAOS

streamerp2p.com/chaos.htm



A startling mix of some mesmerising, melty psychedelia and a perfectly pitched version of *Asteroids* that boasts power-ups.

DEMONSTAR

www.mking.com/mac



Apart from the Kenta Cho and PomPom conversions, good Macintosh shooters are pretty scarce. Which makes *Demonstar* even more essential. A rock-solid vertical shooter with all the usual power-up trimmings, terrific 3D rendered graphics and bearable music.

BATTLE OF YAVIN BATTLE OF ENDOR

www.bruneras.com



Here's something a lot more ambitious. Bruno Marcos' classic Star Wars trilogy games, rendered in 'TrueVision' 3D, manage to be just as polished and playable as the recent GameCube *Rogue Leader/Rogue Squadron* games. They're also more arcadey and less fussy. Marcos is thinking of developing a further game based on the Hoth AT-AT walker battle. Support this man, and do it right now.

'TROID

www.hermitgames.com/troid.php



Described by author Matt Verran (also responsible for the deeply wonderful *Super Mario Pac*) as '*Asteroids* crossed with *Ikaruga*'. A bit more chemically balanced than *Spheres Of Chaos*, with a nice chaining system (hit three rocks of the same size in a row). Great looking, with some thunderous squelchy electro FX.

THE CONCEPT OF HIDING SMALL, INDEPENDENTLY DEVELOPED GAMES IN COMMERCIAL RELEASES IS STARTING TO FIND FAVOUR

Net gains

Thanks to the internet, bringing a game to the attention of the public isn't a problem any more. Homebrew shooters can share attention space with their commercially developed counterparts. "The internet has become an extension of retail," says Michael. "That whole shareware concept of 'give us what you think it's worth' has gone. The internet is one big marketplace. We're in the same shop window, reaching as many potential customers, as someone like Amazon – and that's very liberating." But until home-grown shooters can find their way onto the shelves of Game and Blockbuster, there will always be a removed, underground element to those barely penetrable Japanese websites and shabby PayPal prop-ups. So, how about taking a stealthier approach?

The concept of hiding small, independently developed games in big commercial releases is starting to find a bit of favour. It may feel a bit undersold, but at least it gets people playing. The inclusion of the original Atari arcade *Star Wars/Empire Strikes Back* in *Rogue Squadron II* was a nod in the right direction, but much more striking is old-school, *Tempest*-meets-*Robotron* shooter *Geometry Wars*, hiding in the *Project Gotham Racing 2* garage as a surprisingly playable Easter egg.

"*Geometry Wars* started as something I did when I was bored working on *Project Gotham Racing 1*," says designer **Stephen Cakebread**. "I occasionally added stuff to it over the course of two years, and then the *PGR2* producer suggested we put it in as an Easter egg. I was actually given a week in the main schedule to polish it up and put the Live score-tables in. My motivation behind writing it was: 'Take random bits of cool retro gameplay, plug in shedloads of CPU power and see what



Intensity XS (see facing page) has also spawned an update, *Intensity XS: ReCharge*

drops out'. In the end, it actually delayed the *PGR2* schedule, because the artists were playing it when they should have been modelling cities."

"I think that homebrew games do have a place in mainstream gaming," says *PGR2* associate producer **Chris Pickford**. "To give the player a break from the usually complex main game. But I don't see us accepting submissions from the public just yet. Anything like *Geometry Wars* we do in the future will have to be made in-house."

In the movie industry, bigger studios take profits from their major releases to support smaller projects. The games biz big boys could be about to follow, with heartening noises out of Microsoft about Xbox Arcade – a branch of Xbox Live which plans to offer small games for download at around £5 each. Ideal for gamers who fancy a more immediate, arcadey hit as a bit of relief from faffing around with *Full Spectrum Warrior*.

If, as a game designer, you want to react against the current obsession with realism, knocking up a quick shoot 'em up is clearly the way to go. There's no language barrier (shoot scary things, avoid bullets) and you can be completely abstract and play up to all kinds of wild artistry. While most sophisticated commercial games dump a chunky interface of demands between the player's thought and action, a good shooter always keeps it open-ended and pure. Again, it comes back to the freedom thing. As PomPom's Michael says, "Shooters are about survival with minimal rules. They're anti-realism, because there aren't any physical laws. You can create your own physics. Why bother bowing to the usual imitations of gravity, when you can be free to do whatever you want to do?"

PLATYPUS

www.squashysoftware.com



As a break from scrolling starfields and samey spacey content, *Platypus* takes a refreshingly unique moulded, 'claymation' approach. The chunky collision detection is offset by bright, jolly looks and an excellent *Pop 'N' Twin Bee*-style system of colour-coded power-ups, which are finite and have to be used sparingly. Buy it from the above link (author Anthony Flack's website) and he gets more commission.

GRIDRUNNER++

www.llamasoft.co.uk



Completed as a personal project before he began work on impending opus *Unity*, Jeff Minter updated his own 8bit classic for the mouse-savvy generation. Brutally addictive. One mouse, one button, shoot lots of relentlessly hostile everyday objects and icons, collect sheep to boost bonus multiplier. Minter at his most relaxed and accessible.

INTENSITY XS

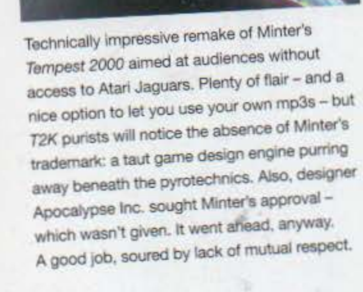
www.midnightsynergy.com/intensity



Slick and traditional horizontal scroller from the well-established Midnight Synergy stable. Plenty of nods to *Gradius* in the power-up/power-down system. Slow to start, but builds to live up to its name on later levels.

TSUNAMI 2010

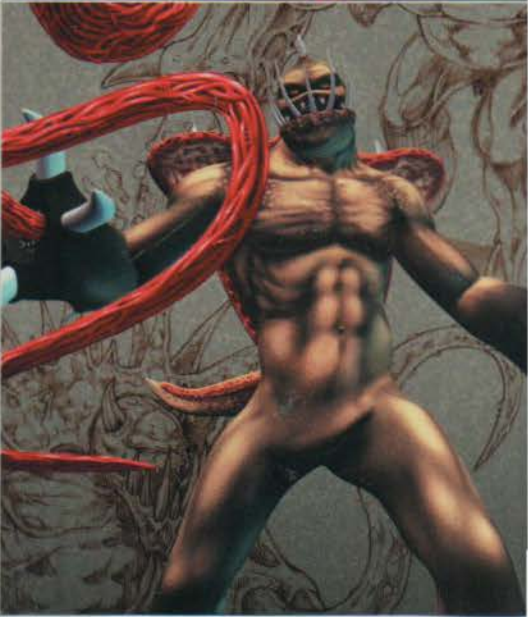
www.uni-ulm.de/~s_cwaech/Games.htm



Technically impressive remake of Minter's *Tempest 2000* aimed at audiences without access to Atari Jaguars. Plenty of flair – and a nice option to let you use your own mp3s – but *T2K* purists will notice the absence of Minter's trademark: a taut game design engine purring away beneath the pyrotechnics. Also, designer Apocalypse Inc. sought Minter's approval – which wasn't given. It went ahead, anyway. A good job, soured by lack of mutual respect.









COLD CALLING

Blizzard Entertainment's rise and rise has turned it into a development superpower. We meet three of its key figures to discover how the Diablo creator works its magic

Founded in 1991 by a trio of UCLA graduates with a quietly determined mission statement to 'make great games', the company that would become Blizzard began as the slightly less snappy Silicon & Synapse, a thirdparty SNES and Mega Drive game developer.

Though it enjoyed gentle success, a change of name and change of platform for 1994's PC realtime strategy title *WarCraft* would see that success become more raucous. The reception of *WarCraft 2*, a product of the company's growing house style and confidence, proved monstrously larger than anyone had predicted – It Came From The LAN Party – and from there Blizzard would be defined by a desire to top its own award-scooping performance.

That philosophy would delay sci-fi epic *StarCraft* for two years in response to a subdued E3 reception, during which time dungeon crawl *Diablo* found a global audience as massive as the dial-up internet connection bills it spawned. When a comprehensively reworked *StarCraft* returned in 1998, it was all-conquering – particularly in Korea, where professional *StarCraft* leagues continue to this day.

Blizzard had found its stride: a steady rhythm of release followed by expansion followed by the next, inevitably postponed, release (the company would come to share id's enlightened approach to release dates). The impatience of its fans would be tempered by their dramatic response to the eventual launches, with most recent titles *Diablo 2* and *WarCraft 3* effortlessly topping sales charts – the latter's four million preorders being something of a portent for success.

Now, under a trackless Orange County sky, inside one of Irvine's many outwardly anonymous office blocks, California is dreaming: Blizzard's massively multiplayer debut, *World Of WarCraft*, is four years into development. *StarCraft*'s return is three years in, with a console-only side story. Behind politely closed doors other worlds are no doubt being imagined, too.

Much like its games, Blizzard's office starts out simple and grows intricate. Departure lounge neutrality gives way to a twilight-and-striplight warren of offices, artwork, in-jokes and history: neatly partitioned chaos, familiar as a student dormitory set up for all-night gaming sessions, overwhelming as a Hollywood set designer's interpretation of what a game development studio should look like.

But what's most striking is the profusion of games. Not just Blizzard's own, which naturally take pride of place, but all games – from the coin-ops in the canteen to televisions piled high with consoles to shelves overflowing with jewel cases. A row of box spines reveals legends dating from last month to last decade, evidence that this is a gamer's developer, enthralled by the medium to which it contributes. And intensely aware of that medium, too, in contrast to the impression that Blizzard's liking for privacy might also be isolating.

A day is barely enough time to take it all in. As the staffers we interview will attest, ten years isn't enough to become inured to the strange alchemy resulting from people who care far too much about games creating them for a living.











Throughout the building, white space fights a losing battle against inspirational decoration (top, above) or the desire to hoard all Blizzard merchandise ever manufactured (centre)







REALTIME BUSINESS STRATEGY

Blizzard's senior vice-president, Frank Pearce



Considering the aloof, number-crunching connotations a vice-president title entails, it comes as a guilty relief that Pearce's office, though presentably managerial, features a life-size sculpture of Orcish antihero Thrall looming over the table at which we're seated – and another that **Frank Pearce** joins us wearing a smart button-up *WarCraft* shirt.

"Our growth has been quite... challenging," he begins, setting a precedent for gentle understatement our other interviewees will follow. "When we were making SNES titles the dev team consisted of maybe one-and-a-half programmers and three or four artists. Even when we started making PC games, with *WarCraft: Orcs And Humans*, that was with a very small team by today's standards."

A very small team compared to today's Blizzard, also: the mythic resonance of its universes has been mirrored by the company's status as a great American success story. *World Of WarCraft* alone has a core team of 65 developers, but also draws on the 25-strong Blizzard Film cinematic department and an eight-person sound studio, in addition to server-side support teams and a Mac port contingent. The company has also acquired a sister studio, San Mateo-based Blizzard North (developer of the *Diablo* line), which has doubled in size to keep pace with the Irvine office's relentless appetite.

"And that doesn't include tech support," adds Pearce. "On SNES games, obviously, there was no tech support, but when we started PC development we made a conscious decision to provide it ourselves, rather than relying on a publisher – we felt it was the only way it could meet our high standards of quality. We have our own QA group for the same reason."

This combination of self-sufficiency and perfectionism is as characteristic of Blizzard as the production design lavished on its games. It suggests that the imminent move into the massively multiplayer arena – a plastic-packed office already awaits the *WOW* game master staff's arrival, life imitating realtime strategy production queue – is not a leap into unknown territories, but an obvious step forward. Blizzard player support has been traditionally generous, from the free Battle.net matchmaking servers to exhaustive post-release updates.

"It's not just a bullet point for the back of the box: I really view the Blizzard community for each specific game to be a huge feature that adds value to the product. So it's important for us to nurture that community and ensure it has a long lifespan," Pearce says. Regular balance fixes, map downloads – and in the cases of *WarCraft 3* and *Diablo 2*, entirely new content – have ensured Blizzard's back catalogue remains viable years after release.

For all their success in keeping their fanbase tapped into the Blizzard vision, repeating that success internally through the company's exponential growth must require just as much dedication.

"It's certainly a challenge we're facing with 300 people. I don't know everyone in the building; I don't think anyone does," Pearce agrees. Notably, the founders have remained involved at the development level: Pearce has coded on most of the company's titles, and assumed team lead duties on *WC3* during the project.

"I call it 'vertical integration'" – he pauses to chuckle at the business-speak. "On *WC3* not only was I programming, I was the team lead, and in my role at a high level in terms of strategic decisions. I enjoy it a lot, because when I'm working on the code for a game I'm very in touch with the product we're making, in touch with the dev team as opposed to just managing – that's not where I want to be."

A similarly bonding aspect of Blizzard culture is their ethos of collaborative design – while there are set design roles on projects, all members participate in the game's direction.

"We made a decision, as a team, to spend every available working hour on it until it was right. And that took five months, but I think a big factor is the passion everyone has"

"I want to say 'by accident'," grins Pearce when we ask how this came about, "but I'm sure it was a philosophy Allen [Adham, one of Pearce's fellow co-founders] was applying to the way we did things. We had committees, 'strike teams', who would talk about the biggest issues at the time. If you had ideas or opinions you could provide them to the team, and feel that they would objectively represent your feedback. And we still use that model."

The development philosophy most familiar to Blizzard's audience, however, is that of not releasing games 'until they're ready' – a strict regime of quality control that Pearce appreciates is a hard-earned right.

"We're very blessed in that our track record for success gives us a lot of leverage. As long as we can continue to prove that we do what we do very well, then our opinions on how long to hold a game are given a lot of weight. Newer developers probably face issues with milestone payments, publishers leaning on them to get the product done early... There's a constant battle between developers and publishers."

Though the effect of extended development on the finished titles is obvious, with few western developers able to match their finessing and polish, we wonder what effect it has on the teams concerned.

"When we talked about crunching for *WC3*, we wanted to get the game to our fans as soon as humanly possible, and for it to be something we would be proud of," Pearce recalls. "So we made a decision, as a team, to spend every available working hour on it until it was right. And that took five months. It's a difficult process to manage, but I think a big factor is the passion that everyone has here, what they share in terms of a vision for the games."

By nature, the company is an overprotective parent, grilling would-be suitors on its prospects and demanding its franchises are delivered home by 11 – and this has resulted in a somewhat edgy relationship with thirdparties. Infamously, Blizzard's only canned project, *WarCraft Adventures: Lord Of The Clans*, was a thirdparty effort, and more recently *StarCraft: Ghost* has suffered lengthy delays and a change of co-developer.

"It's an area where we've tried to broaden our horizons, and it's probably where we've had the biggest challenges, because we're not as close to the development process," Pearce comments.

Though Pearce won't be drawn on whether the recent arrangement with Swinging Ape Studios will see more Blizzard franchises continuing on console after *Ghost*, we ask if he doesn't feel that the growing online multiplayer community, and the enduring popularity of *Diablo*-homage dungeon hacks, indicate a platform and audience ripe for Blizzard attention.

"Ever since the first *WC* our expertise has been on the PC, so we've stayed true to our expertise. And I look at those titles' success and I don't feel we missed out by focusing our efforts there," says Pearce, "but we've never had a shortage of great ideas for console games – just of people to implement them."



THE ART OF WAR

Blizzard's art director, Samwise Didier

"It's pretty cool seeing how we started as such a small company and grew to be one of the biggest names in the industry," declares **Samwise Didier**, displaying the affability that sees the term 'laid-back Californian' register 7,000 Google hits, "but we're still doing the same thing as when we started – making great games."

Another constant, even across three distinct universes, has been Blizzard's art design: a striking, pulp sensibility that may be an acquired taste, but one acquirable on either side of the Pacific, side-stepping polarisation of appeal to either eastern or western audiences. A recently launched fan art program – selected pieces are featured both on Blizzard's web presence and in the office foyer – draws an impressively global mix of submissions.

"We haven't changed our style since the very beginning. The first orc we ever did, in [1994 platform-action title] *Blackthorne*, was just a little guy chasing after Blackthorne – but we thought, 'Hey, these guys are cool', so we used that character for our orcs in *WarCraft*," says Didier. "Artistically, we've always gone for the same sort of goals: we try to keep everything over-the-top, over-proportioned, and really colourful, then we add in as much 'comic factor' as we can."

Is that the secret of Blizzard art's success, then – tapping the visual language of comic book heroes and villains hardwired into the gaming generation at childhood? "I think we have enough realism to appeal to the people who don't like cartoons, but then we have enough big, bulky green guys to keep the kids who're into comics, into anime. And we try to hit the stereotypes – if you look at *StarCraft*, you've got the redneck marines, you've got the highly intelligent, evolved aliens, you've got the all-devouring bugs. All of the artists here can name all the X-Men, they have their favourite characters from *Street Fighter* and *Samurai Shodown*, it's like a geek squad here." He laughs, then deadpans: "And that's a badge you wear with honour."

Though the style has survived a ten-year stretch intact, the delivery has had to adapt to a rapidly changing gaming landscape, with progressively higher-resolution prerendered sprites finally giving way to full 3D in *WarCraft 3*. "[3D] was sort of new to us back then, and we didn't have a lot of guys," Didier says, "but when *WC3* rolled around people were already doing 3D games, so it was our time to step up and shake off the shackles."

Ironically, the move away from 2D presentation would benefit the transition from original illustration to in-game model: "Back in the day, for *SC*, we'd say, 'We need this type of unit', and we'd just make it, but for *WC3* we concepted the units first and then modelled them after that. We'd sometimes take elements from the drawings and use them for textures – before then, we rarely concepted anything, and that required a lot of reworking."









It's reassuringly difficult to find a section of the office where you can swing a joypad without hitting a games machine. Even more difficult to resist the urge to embrace the *Rampart* cabinet

Blizzard's 3D models would largely retain the personality of their prerendered predecessors, without machine-choking hardware intensity. It seems the heavy lines and primary colours that defined the company's art design have to some degree future-proofed it, emphasising style over polygonal substance.

"If you have strong artwork, more polys can definitely help make it look better, but you can get away with a lot by just having a cool shape," says Didier. "And then the animation is what really carries it – the newest guy on our team has been here five years, so he and the other animators definitely have a feel for the art, and their own ideas are right on."

Such an art-heavy lead, as opposed to technology-driven graphical fidelity, is increasingly unusual in the PC field: we put to Didier that Blizzard is almost running counter to the PC gaming community's fascination with photorealistic rendering.

"Blizzard, in my opinion, has never been an on-the-edge tech company," he says. "People are really pushing to get photorealistic, and drawing photorealistic stuff isn't that fun. It's always the most boring thing to do in art class – 'Go draw a bowl of apples' – when everyone would rather be drawing orcs and warriors and demons and monsters and spaceships and burning stars."

Agreeing on the cosmic unfairness of being assessed on the still life rather than the death knight sketched in the margin, we remark on the divergent approaches to portraying a virtual world seen with *World Of WarCraft* and *EverQuest 2*.

"We wanted to make *WOW* look like a living, breathing world, but a version of the world that's ours," explains Didier. "We've gone for that sort of cartoony feel not necessarily because everyone else is going ultra-realistic, but because it's more fun to draw – there's more colours, there's more dynamic characters, you're not tied to being compared to something that's real."

"Photorealistic stuff is the most boring thing in art class. Everyone would rather be drawing orcs and warriors and demons and monsters and spaceships and burning stars"

And operating under the logic of the fantastic rather than the gloomily practical must allow more interplay between art and game design, especially in an environment that values collaboration as much as Blizzard does.

"It works both ways," Didier agrees. "The designers will have an idea, and we'll all sit there and try to come up with something to make that work, and vice versa: we'll throw up a gigantic bug, or undead Crypt Lord, and they'll be like, 'What are we going to do with *this* guy?' This is a pretty tight company, and everyone works together."

Even with so much history and shared confidence driving the art department, Didier stresses that the new blood is just as important, to challenge, expand and improve the Blizzard style. That's arguably most apparent with the company's cinematic division, who have grown, both in visual scope and filmic technique, into a powerhouse as well-regarded as Square's legions of CG animators.

"In the beginning we were hungry for people – if they could draw a cool picture on blue-lined notebook paper they were in. Now we're big enough where we can still take those people, but we can also get people with industry experience. And the cinematic department have just kept pushing, now it's like watching mini-movies." So is there potential for a full-length Blizzard Film feature? "I hope so," he enthuses. "But they have to get our cinematics for the game done first."

And Didier knows his priorities, as we find when concluding on how important a unified art direction is to the success of Blizzard's titles.

"I think our art is one of the things that help make our games. But no matter how good-looking the game is, if it sucks to play you're not playing it."

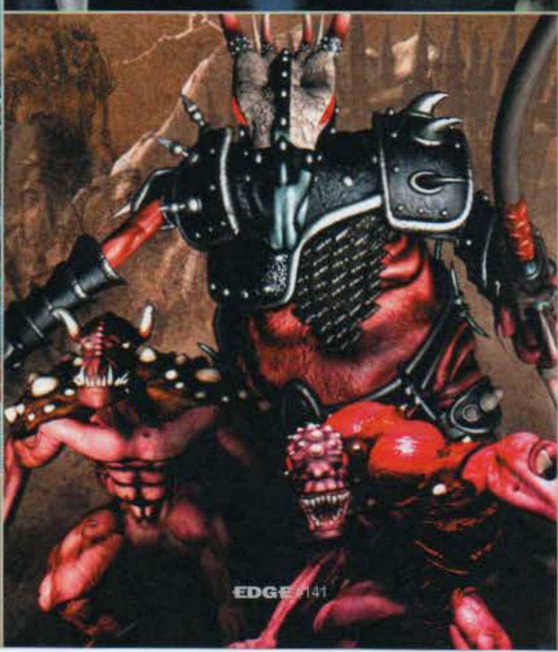
He grimaces, mimes rewinding the recorder, corrects himself: "If it's no good to play, you're not playing it."

'Sucks' works for us, we assure him.



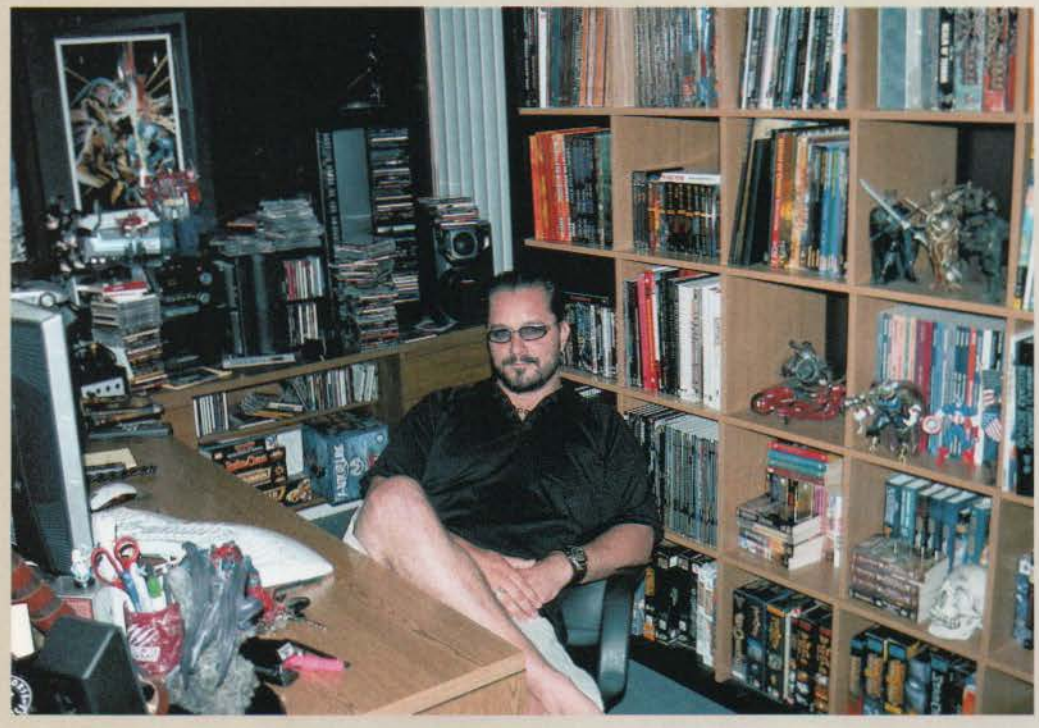
As we spot an 'it's a *StarCraft* thing, you wouldn't understand' photo opportunity, our accompanying Blizzard PR nods understandingly: "Everyone loves to take photos of the fridge"







Blizzard has an aptly solid grasp of the importance of land and resources. We assume the left-hand 'office' – with the *Frozen Throne* standee for a door – is waiting for an upgrade



WORDS OF WARCRAFT

Blizzard's VP of creative development, Chris Metzen

The sheer amount of media in **Chris Metzen**'s office – comics, novels, artbooks, gamebooks, videogames – is almost daunting, threatening to bury him beneath an avalanche of storytelling. But Metzen's own creative output is no less prodigious: his work has created the formative mythos around each of Blizzard's universes.

"I was probably the 15th employee – I started on *Justice League Task Force* for the SNES as an animator," Metzen recalls. "*WarCraft* had turned out to be an unexpected success, and it was around the start of *WarCraft 2* that I stayed late one night and jammed up a three-paragraph summary of what might have happened between *WC* and *WC2*. That got me put on *WC2* as a 'designer'. We didn't know what that role would be at the time: I think the bosses expected it would be making pie graphs, mechanical design, but I just sat there all day making stuff up, and it took off from there."

There's that Blizzard understatement again. With Metzen's extrapolation, *WarCraft* grew from a self-contained battle between two races into an entire continent of clashing cultures, then a world of them.

"I was trying to build a big history based on this small conflict. And with *World Of WarCraft*, you're seeing this little idea from eight, nine years ago bring about this thing infinitely bigger than any of us, with hundreds of people having now forged it and added their vision."

While cultural context would inform the character of *WC* and *StarCraft*'s opposing factions: "Everyone designs the game: we all come up with unit types and powers and construct that chess game, and I'm the guy that plays goalie on whether ideas are appropriate to this race, culture, mechanic," explains Metzen – it was his devotion to backstory that would strike a chord with Blizzard's growing fanbase.

"I grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, as a Star Wars fan, as a comic fan, with their vast continuities. They hooked me so young, and kept providing me with serial instalments of IP that I thought: that's where it's at. I'm always confident we'll build cool, fun games to get people to play – but what if we attempted to construct more of a universe for them, and keep people thinking about them when they're not playing. So that was always the theory. It was hard in practice: I remember the bosses telling me: 'Dude, we need you doing pie graphs, no one cares about this and that – we just want gameplay.' But over time we found people were responding to these geeky details, and it became part of who we are, and how we develop."

Accordingly, as the Blizzard universes grew in density, their delivery became more sophisticated. Where *WC2*'s plot was narrated, *StarCraft*'s was to evolve through character-driven drama during the game. The response from players was positive, and the method was refined for *WarCraft 3*'s sweeping story arc.

"Certainly our business is all about gameplay, and the online component of our wargame business is massive, but if we're clever enough and bold enough, there's always ways to make you care," reasons Metzen. "In all videogames there's the pure, visceral, tactile… *hit* of the mechanical flow of gameplay, which is what addicts you in the first place. The secondary element is the immersion, escapism, the fantasy of it. And if you're going to spend 20, 30 hours on a singleplayer game – dammit, it better take you somewhere."

But the people still playing *Diablo 2* are likely more interested in that next super-rare item than being transported to the world of Sanctuary, we pose: are there any regrets that the mechanics ultimately usurp the story, no matter how much effort goes into the latter?

"I don't regret it – that *Diablo* clickfest. 'I get my new stuff in two levels' is the point, after all. If two kids out there" – he pauses, decides to raise his sights – "If *three* kids out there paid attention to the story and were compelled at all, if they read the manual story and thought it was cool, and buy one of these silly novels we put out because they like the universe, then that was the point too.

"That's the coolest thing in the world, if someone wants to read your stories," he continues as we look to the wall-mounted cover art of the novel line. "I just always wanted to see something like [the novels] happen, because growing up with my head in a book, novels legitimise the idea. It's not about 'Let's try and make as much money as possible', it's about seeing people respond to it at that level. And that leads you to suspect you did something right, and then you scrabble to maintain that, and push it further."

Even Metzen isn't sure where that push leads in the wake of *WOW* – after the solidification of all this history into a tangible world, the handover of narrated moments in time to unpredictable, unending virtual life.

"I like to think the series will always go on. It's hard for me to imagine at this point with *WC*, or *SC*, or any licence, what the exclamation mark is at the end of the day. Is there a bigger kind of game to make, and what does that look like? Someone's going to figure it out, and I'm sure we'll put our heads together to look forward in that way."

Is it possible to glance sideways, though, to step back from an ongoing world to continue with self-contained titles?

"[MMOGs] sure change the landscape. I mean, check out what *EverQuest* is doing: their sequel's in the future! The game's still going on, but now you have this new twist predicated off a concept… It makes things really weird. There really is no precedent, I guess is the point."

With our time nearly up, we drop in an unprepared, but burning, six-year question – what was behind *SC*'s frontier western riff, all slide guitar twang and Confederate flags fluttering against prairie sky and starfield?

"To be dead honest with you, I didn't like it at first,"

"In all videogames there's the pure, visceral, tactile… *hit* of the mechanical flow of gameplay, which is what addicts you in the first place. The secondary element is the immersion"

admits Metzen. "When we first started jamming on it I had this big space opera idea… the cinematics department had these sequences with backwoods, beer-guzzling yokels, and I'm like [sighs] 'Come on, guys, we're supposed to be selling this classy universe here'. But I loosened up over time, and thought screw it, if you guys think people will respond to this, let's go all the way. That's how the Confederacy happened, although the last thing on my mind was 'This could offend a lot of Southern people: we're stereotyping a massive part of my country'. It all just ended up working. And as we've found on almost every development path, that's the magic, when it's contentious, because it forces you to step up creatively and make the concept work."

He leans back in his chair for the first time in the interview. "That's the beauty of game development: having 60 people making decisions by committee."

















The Korean *StarCraft* merchandising (centre) explains all those crushing defeats on private Korean servers – if we'd been washing down *SC* crisps with *SC* pop in our SC trainers, we could have won









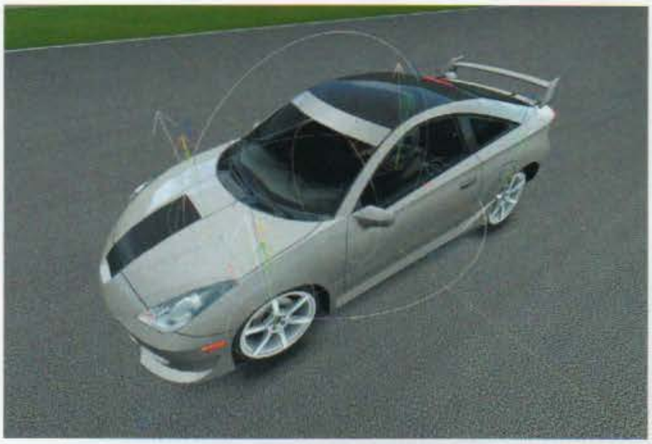
Out of the toybox

Having conquered our leisure time, games are now out to take over the rest of the world, too. It's a serious business…

At best, the conventional view of videogames is of an artform that's juvenile in every sense of the word. At worst, however, it's seen as dangerous waste of time; something symptomatic of the wider dumbing down of western civilisation.

In either case, the term 'serious games' isn't one that has much resonance. But it was exactly the term chosen to kickstart an initiative to highlight the potential uses of games outside the traditional entertainment sector.

Illustration: **Rod Hunt**





With a history of high-level vehicle simulations, small studio Lateral Visions is now employing its skills in developing an online automotive engineering environment

"Having been involved in a number of projects, getting the right title is always a tough gig," explains **Ben Sawyer**, co-director of the Serious Games Initiative. "For the uninformed people we want to reach, it works well. Remember, you only have two seconds to catch these people's attention so you better say what you mean quick. Serious games are games that are used to solve problems. It doesn't mean we think entertainment is frivolous."

Set up by the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, DC, the Serious Games Initiative is a formalised attempt to encourage the use of games and game technology to create tools and simulators to improve the US public sector's management and leadership expertise in three specific domains: healthcare and hospital management, education and high-school leadership, and public lands management.

It's a sector Sawyer knows well in his other role as the president of Digitalmill. A Maine-based technology development firm, its first major project in this area was *Virtual U*, a university management simulation. Funded by the Alfred P Sloan Foundation to help the understanding of management practices at America's universities, it's proved to be something of a crossover success. Originally available only to administrative professionals, it's since been revised and now can be downloaded by anyone who wants a freebie, albeit a relatively serious one.

"The problems of government policy, healthcare and education are huge in scale," explains Sawyer, who has experience of politics from a stint working on a Clinton presidential campaign as well as a lifetime as a committed gamer. "To solve them, we need to think outside of the box so it's no surprise people are looking at the alternative approaches game developers represent. Some people see *Grand Theft Auto* as unredeeming, but I see it as example of an industry hurtling forward at warp speed. That power is going to give us exciting tools to apply in different directions."

And the Serious Games Initiative seems to be a movement on a roll. Its first conference was held over two days at the Game Developers Conference in March, which was followed by another event, this time focused on educational games, prior to E3.

"The problems of government policy, healthcare and education are huge, so it's no surprise people look at the alternative approaches games represent"

Infiniteams

Developer: TPLD
Funding agency: n/a
Release: 2004 **Cost:** available on request
www.tpld.ltd.uk/products/infiniteams



Mixing the psychology of team dynamics with a multiplayer environment, *Infiniteams* is a commercially developed tool for team learning. Designed as an aid for human resource managers, it strands a team of between four and eight people on a remote island and provides a variety of problems and mysteries for them to solve. By progressing through these challenges, it's hoped groups of individuals will find themselves communicating, collaborating and embracing the behaviour of an effective team.

SimHealth

Developer: Thinking Tools
Funding agency: Maxis
Release: 1994 **Cost:** $40 www.maxis.com



On the back of the incredible success of *SimCity*, Will Wright's franchise spawned a number of bizarre game types, but *SimHealth* took the concept to its purest level. A policy simulation, it provided players with a very broad-based approach featuring basic societal values, such as liberty verses efficiency, and charged them to build national healthcare policy on that basis. Key questions include how to control medical costs, what benefits should be offered to all citizens, and how health insurance will work.



Virtual U

Developer: Digitalmill/Enlight Software/Jackson Hole Higher Education Group
Funding agency: Alfred P Sloan Foundation
Release: 2001 **Cost:** free www.virtual-u.org



Designed to foster better understanding of management practices in American colleges and universities, *Virtual U* provides the opportunity to step into the role of a university president. Players are responsible for establishing and monitoring five major components such as budgets, course and student scheduling, student enrolment, accommodation and classrooms and overall performance. The challenge is to improve the institution through techniques such as resource allocation, minority enrollment policies, and policies for promoting faculty. Progress is demonstrated by an annual letter of review from the *Virtual U* board.

SuperCharged!

Developer: Comparative Media Studies Program, MIT
Funding agency: Microsoft iCampus
Release: 2003 **Cost:** n/a educationarcade.org/gallery



Developed as part of MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program into educational games, *SuperCharged!* was created to help physics undergraduates gain a deeper intuitive grasp of how electromagnetism works. Using Criterion's Renderware engine, players have to interact with electromagnetic forces to propel themselves through various levels, with different particle types being characterised via coloured trails as well as audio cues such as pitch and volume.





In$ider

Developer: PricewaterhouseCoopers
Funding agency: PricewaterhouseCoopers
Release: 2002 **Cost:** variable – provided on a per-user basis www.intellexis.com



An internal learning solution created by PricewaterhouseCoopers and distributed by Intellexis, *In$ider* was developed to help auditors understand the complexities of derivatives trading, such as hedging interest rate and currency risk, with respect to corporate balance sheets. Set in the future, players join the finance team of intergalactic mining company Gyronortex, where they are required to master the basics of hedging, swaps and options over the course of the four-CD, event-driven simulation.

NitroGenius

Developer: Play2Learn/Energy Research Centre/Alterra
Funding agency: Dutch Ministry of Housing, Spatial Planning and the Environment
Release: 2001 **Cost:** free (singleplayer version)
www.serc.nl/play2learn/products/nitrogenius



Thanks to its intense agriculture, Holland suffers from high levels of nitrogen pollution, and this was the spark for *NitroGenius*. Originally a fourplayer game, each player takes the role of industry, agriculture, government or society. Every 90 seconds, each side gets to make a move, whether it be R&D, forming pressure groups or easing controls, with the results generated by a environmental model developed by Dutch pollution scientists. First played at the Second International Nitrogen Conference, a singleplayer version is now available for download.

Hamlet on the Holodeck

The title of one of the most influential books on game culture, Janet Murray's challenge to developers to come up with a character as compelling as Hamlet is being put to the test thanks to a joint project between the Royal Shakespeare Company and MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program. In an attempt to provide an entry point to The Tempest, they are developing a singleplayer game called *Prospero's Island*. More a journey of non-linear textual discovery than a narrative adventure, the player is shipwrecked on a fantastical island and gets to interact with characters from the play. One interesting game mechanic being tested is underlining that every choice has consequences. Hence, if the player dies or backtracks on decisions made, the game world drains of colour. This can be reversed through greater insights in the characters and environment. The goal is for the game is given as enhancing the immediate experience of the watching the play, not displace its centrality as a piece of theatre.

With a healthcare game conference also scheduled for October, it's certainty fulfilling its aim of creating synergy between different sets of experts.

"When I look back to where things were in 2002, it's pretty amazing how quickly it's progressed," Sawyer reckons. "The initiative has helped raise the profile of serious games thanks to strong support from key organisations and the community. Now we've got to make the transition from a group that has helped bring a lot of energy, to a group that is making a lot more happen tactically. As I said at the Serious Games Summit, we're a fad until we're not."

So it's at this point where the hard work really begins. While the end results of developing a serious game are often similar to conventional PC games, the business models involved are very different. For this reason, one of the biggest problems for developers is funding. With little chance of commercial exploitation of the finished product, the cost of development needs to be provided by an agency, whether that be governmental, corporate or charitable. Getting this type of funding is typically time-consuming, while the development process itself can be extremely bureaucratic. And, as Sawyer points out, these tend to be the types of organisations that love meetings and reports – exactly the sort of things people join the videogame industry to avoid.

"Developers have a lot to learn," he says. "This is a business-to-business market that has very long ramp up times and expensive business development work. Also, I think developers have to learn how to build games that will be run as applications by their users. It doesn't mean you make your game look like Microsoft Word but it does mean you need to park some previous approaches at the door."

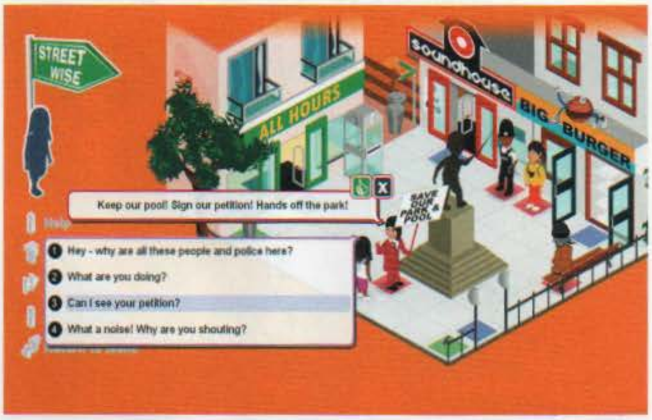
In the UK, at least, there are some reasons to be cheerful. Ironically, one is the fragmentation of many developers over the past couple of years. The result is a number of experienced teams that are too small to land traditional publishing deals, and hence are looking to exploit their skills in other related areas.

One such outfit is Liverpool-based Lateral Visions. With a background in high-definition vehicle dynamics, it's recently signed up to develop an online automotive engineering academy for NESTA, the lottery-funded National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts. Called Racing Academy, the project is a persistent gaming environment. "It's designed to provide a progressive opportunity to learn about physics, engineering and automotive engineering for students from GCSE level up to postgraduate level within in a virtual community," explains **Carl Gavin**, Lateral Visions' MD. The company is also working with the police on another as-yet-unannounced vehicle-based project.

"It's ironic but there's an attitude in the games industry, which I used to agree with, in that we should only make games and not use the technology elsewhere. In the previous company I worked for, we turned down requests to use games technology for other uses as a matter of course," says Gavin. "But now, as a small developer, the games industry is a scary place. It's possible to secure our intellectual property and our future by being broadminded." The long-term goal for Lateral Visions remains developing

"As a small developer, the games industry is a scary place. It's possible to secure our intellectual property and our future by being broadminded"





Drawing on elements of roleplaying games, Desq's Streetwise project is a component of Channel 4's Gridclub, which deals with issues such as bullying

English Taxi

Developer: Desq/Aqua Pacific **Funding agency:** British Council Beijing
Release: 2003 **Cost:** free (in China) www.thinkuk.org.cn



Using similar gameplay mechanics to *Crazy Taxi*, *English Taxi* was designed to aid in the teaching of English as a second language to Chinese students. Players drive around the fictional Spa Town, picking up archetypal British passengers as they go, listening and responding to their conversations along the way. Around 150,000 copies of the game have been distributed within language centres in China.





Launched at the 2004 Game Developers Conference, the Serious Games Initiative brings together developers, government agencies and funding bodies to encourage the use of games and game technology to improve management and training

cutting-edge games, however, and its current workload is a means to an end.

"Finding sympathetic developer partners in this sector is a problem," agrees **David Squire**, director of Desq, a Sheffield-based studio that focuses on Flash and online training and education games. "We're always on the lookout for console and handheld developers who are willing to work on titles that might not sell in droves or, more importantly, who are open to alternative uses and themes for games. There's not many of them around."

For those that are, Desq's work demonstrates some of the ways in which gaming concepts are valuable when co-opted into the mainstream. One interesting example is English Taxi, a Crazy Taxi-style English language and culture vehicle for Chinese students. "Streetwise for Channel 4's Gridclub is another example of re-purposing gameplay elements," Squire adds. "In this case we were using the features of nonplayer character interactions from roleplaying games and isometric chat sites like Habbo Hotel, and adding a serious issue – relationships problems and bullying issues of primary-school-age kids. The RPG format is great because there's often no right or wrong answer; it's more about experiencing things and seeing reactions to your actions."

But while there are some examples of serious game development in the UK and Europe there's nothing like the enthusiasm that's been unleashed in the States. "Americans seem to be more receptive to alternative markets and models," Squire ponders. "They've coined the phrase 'social capital' and it has real kudos attached to it, both in terms of real money and public perception. It's that which is currently driving the Serious Games movement. In the UK, we're still dealing with overtones of Smashie and Nicey's 'charidee'."

Yet, like Sawyer, he's convinced the market potential remains huge. "We're now a generation of digital natives; people with games and interactivity in their bloodstream are growing up and getting proper jobs. They aren't going to engage with the usual training programmes. They're more likely to learn using technology and processes they're familiar with – games and other immersive interactive media," he points out. "It can be tough getting your head around the fact that game design and the process of playing a game can be applied to things other than racing and shooting. But, once you do, it's clear there's a lot more to playing games than first meets the eye."

"Americans seem to be more receptive to alternative markets and models. They've coined the phrase 'social capital' and it has real kudos attached to it"



FloodRanger

Developer: Discovery Software/View the World
Funding agency: Foresight (Office of Science and Technology, DTI) **Release:** 2002 **Cost:** £50
www.discoverysoftware.co.uk/FloodRanger.htm



Aimed at flood defence practitioners, local authorities, insurers, universities and schools, *FloodRanger* is a game about managing flood defences along rivers and coasts. Its objective is to defend urban areas and sites of special scientific interest while maintaining levels of housing and employment for an expanding population. Using terrain loosely based on the east coast of England, the user can select between two world-future scenarios combined with four climate-change scenarios taken from the UK Hadley Centre for Climate Change.

Fighting the next war

One market for the serious games world that needed little encouragement is the military. It has used training simulations for years, even to the extent of employing pen-and-paper roleplaying and board wargaming. Computer-based simulation was simply the next technological step. But even with this relatively open attitude, the success of the internally developed *America's Army* remains a surprising example of the enthusiasm shown by some areas of the US military in the power of computer games. Created by a team of freelance developers and 20-odd serving soldiers using the Unreal engine, it has generated over ten million downloads – not bad for a recruitment tool which cost less than 0.5 per cent of the army's annual recruitment budget. A new version, *America's Army: Overmatch*, is on the way, while Ubisoft will handle the publishing of console versions in 2005. In addition, another studio, this time staffed by civilian developers, has been set up to expand what's becoming a something of a hardcore computer game franchise. It was a similar story with the recently released *Full Spectrum Warrior*. Developed by Pandemic Studios under contract from the US army and the Institute For Creative Technologies, it was one of two squad-based realtime tactical simulations based on the army's Military Operations In Urban Terrain program. And within the US military, other not-for-public-consumption tools are being developed for more complex training missions, too. One is the There Army MMP, an online communications platform being developed by There Inc, a massively multiplayer game developer. A four-year, \$3.5million project, it's designed to be a toolset that allows many different training applications and missions to be set up quickly.

Biohazard: Hot Zone

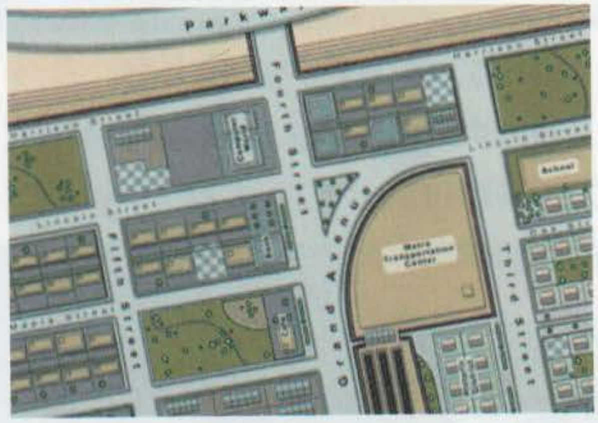
Developer: Carnegie Mellon Entertainment Technology Center/Comparative Media Studies Program, MIT **Funding agency:** Microsoft iCampus **Release:** TBC **Cost:** n/a www.etc.cmu.edu/projects/biohazard



A networked multiplayer collaborative game designed to aid the training of the emergency services with respect to first-response protocol for hazardous material outbreaks, *Biohazard* is being jointly developed by Carnegie Mellon Entertainment Technology Center and MIT's Comparative Media Studies Program. In addition, input is being provided by Pennsylvania's Region 13 Weapons of Mass Destruction Task Force, and the Federation of American Scientists. The player assumes the role of a fireman, responding to a chemical attack in a mall environment.

Building A Home Of Our Own

Developer: Media Options
Funding agency: National Association of Home Builders/Freddie Mac
Release: 2002 **Cost:** free for teachers www.homesofourown.org



Designed as a teaching tool for a middle school classroom environment, *Building A Home Of Our Own* was funded as part of the National Association Of Home Builders National Housing Endowment and mortgage lender Freddie Mac. The game presents a macro view of the home-building process, working on schedule and within a budget to design and build a house from site selection to final sale. Players collect information, solve problems and make choices as they build a 3D home and then review credit applications before selling to the buyer of their choice.



Edge's review policy

Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge's** rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

DOA Xtreme Beach Volleyball

The perfectly judged soundtrack, the endearing clumsiness of the pool-hopping game, the outfits – really, an *XBV* sequel appeals more than another *DOA*.



(Xbox) Tecmo

World Of WarCraft

It's a matter of priorities: some quest for Epic-class items, some want to take the war to the gates of the enemy capital, and we want the rare white kitten pet.



(PC) Vivendi

Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay

The framerate may cough and chug on occasion but Starbreeze's environments are worth a second look. One of the most atmospheric Xbox games to date.



(Xbox) Vivendi

Every Extend

Some days, you need to be a bomb, only capable of destroying all that you touch. *Every Extend* lets you detonate your stress without killing any colleagues.



(PC) Freeware

testscreen

The world's most respected videogame reviews

Rewriting history

Can new old be too new?

Id Software has claimed that *Doom 3* is, in essence, a remake of the first *Doom*. With today's technology at its disposal, it has been able to realise its original vision in a manner that is more true to the ideas kicking around in 1994. While in Hollywood King Kong has been remade twice and is about to be given a fourth retelling, this doesn't happen very often in the gaming world. But why not? Just think about what it might mean. How about an *Elite* (below) with planets made not of simple circles hanging in space but of mountains, cities and oceans?

That's if the retelling worked, of course. In some respects, id's does not. Because in *Doom 3* we do not get heaving waves of baddies bearing down on us like a tide of pure evil; instead, the environment itself – specifically the dark bits where scrabbling hellspawn lurk – is intended to compensate as a kind of enemy in itself. Furthermore, the existence of fellow human lifeforms on Mars scratches away at the original game's macabre spirit of isolation and oppressiveness.

There are other issues not related to the 'remake' process. Id wanted to remain faithful to the original *Doom* but clearly could not help but acknowledge the innovation that has been hammered out over the last ten years of firstperson shooters. Unfortunately, its biggest concession in this regard – your in-game PDA – can detract from the brooding atmosphere so much effort is spent building elsewhere. Who actually thought it'd be really entertaining to sift through emails in order to find keypad combinations to unlock doors?

And, considering one of id's points of inspiration has always been Aliens, why do these marines' shooters not have built-in torches? Then there's *Super Turbo Turkey Puncher 3*, the coin-op you find in the Mars facility's canteen area. Why is it there? To show that id's sense of humour isn't up to the level of sophistication commonly found in make-a-funny-videogame-parody-using-Photoshop threads on internet forums? Or does it really think that videogames will look like this hundreds of years in the future? No, it is simply a dumb abberation.

So, despite its technical proficiencies, *Doom 3* isn't nearly as clever as it thinks it is. Take a look at *The Sims 2* to see a game with beauty *and* brains.













Doom 3

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **id Software** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**



True to source, the imps remain your most relentless enemy, boiling out of dark corners and hemming you in



Forget pain, suffering and death, *Doom 3* is about fear. Primal fear. The dark, the unknown. Flickering lights, gloomy corners, half-glimpsed movement. It's about trying to distinguish a groan from a creaking pipe; a slumped figure who may or may not rear up as you walk by; a constant verse-chorus of uneasy calm followed by a desperate battle for survival.

Plot-wise, this is a redux of the original *Doom*. You're the new guy at a huge waste-reprocessing facility on Mars. Following some military meddling with matter transference, the base has been overrun with nightmarish beasties and it's down to you to tool up and take them on.

However, the story isn't the only redux. The theory behind *Doom 3* is that this is *Doom* cubed; all the charisma and raw thrill of the original game transposed into the 21st century. In practice, things are somewhat more complex. Visually, despite the truly arresting perfection of the environments, this isn't a recreation of the B-movie brashness of the original: *Doom 3*'s aesthetic achievements are muted by its functional take on the future. Initially underwhelming, this restraint emphasises the body horror once hell spills over into the base, squirming umbilical cords violating the sterile corridors.

Nor does the pace of the combat mimic your memories. *Doom 3* drip-feeds measured confrontations, a contrast to the extravagant attrition of the first game. Rather than being a remake of the *Doom* that millions loved, this is a remake of the *Doom* we never saw, the *Doom* id hoped to make but couldn't. Now every encounter has the potential to drive you to the edge of your seat, every enemy representing an intimate, lethal threat.

Again, these enemies are mostly original *Doom* upgrades with some hideous, *Quake*-style zombie-animal hybrids thrown in. The mutant grunts tend to keep their distance behind cover, but it's nothing you could really call 'AI'. Mostly, everything scuttles out from the shadows and steams in without any self regard, hunting you down wherever you hide. It's kill or be killed. Again and again and again. And again.

This is where some of the first doubts start to set in. The reliance on contrived event scripting in a game whose manual encourages you to depend on quicksaving can rapidly undermine your queasy nervousness. Repeating sections round for round and move for move until perfected makes a mockery of the carefully constructed suspense. The tight funnelling of the claustrophobic environments, so crucial for the game's mood, also severely reduces your tactical options during firefights. *Doom* was always a corridor shooter, but now, even in more elaborate environments, there's often literally no room for manoeuvre.

Manoeuvring, however, was only ever a means to an end, and that end remains the killing which was always the cathartic heart of *Doom*'s appeal. All the old weapons are present and politically incorrect: shotgun, chaingun, plasma rifle, rocket launcher and, most thrillingly, a deluxe edition of the chainsaw that chews up the hardiest hellspawn. The controversial decision to force you to toggle between flashlight and weapon was clearly intended to amplify the player's sense of vulnerability. It accomplishes this, but at the price of an absurd and cheap conceit. It's a vulnerability brought about solely by a whim of the developer rather than arising from the situation and, as such, can soon provoke resentment.

This cheapness is also a feature of the game's rudimentary puzzles. Personnel PDAs must be found and plundered for door codes, fleshing out the story as you go. It can be a powerfully emotional system: let a dead soldier's voice log play as you explore and his cheery mundanities echo chillingly off





The requirement to toggle your torch is less frustrating once you upgrade to weapons which require two hands

Rather than a remake of the Doom that millions loved, this is a remake of the Doom we never saw, the Doom id hoped to make but couldn't

Previously in **E**112, **E**125, **E**128, **E**138










Taking a hit sends you reeling, disorientating you and occasionally slamming you down stairs and over ledges. Keep your distance

blank metal walls. As a mechanic, however, it's too obviously a meaningless elaboration of 'find green key to open green door'.

Other niggles break the painstakingly crafted atmosphere. Some sections feel pointless and tacked-on: a tedious barrel-loading minigame; an interminable sequence of faffing with a mechanical platform. Most annoyingly, when the monsters die, they lose all sense of weight and disintegrate to ash with indecent speed.

There's no question that id knows its audience. Although the game's simplicity caters for newcomers in a perfectly intuitive way, the team realises that original *Doom* fans will poke around in dark corners, expecting to find health/armour upgrades and secret areas. And also expecting, with perhaps a little more nostalgia than genuine dread, a zombie to spring up behind them while they do. There are also plenty of in-jokes and back-references buried away in the petty bureaucracies, a worthwhile reward for those keen to devour every crumb of PDA detail.

Even these complaints, however, can't entirely erode *Doom*'s accomplished terror. It's impossible for your heart not to race as you sweat out the fright of its peerless audio design, chattering voices and muffled sobs endlessly scraping at your senses. It's this that makes irrelevant the debates of how *Doom* is *Doom*. Terror is the surest badge of *Doom 3*'s heritage: this is a tense, ultraviolent action game which demands you revisit the way we played the original game: off with the lights, on with the headphones, and up with the volume.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten



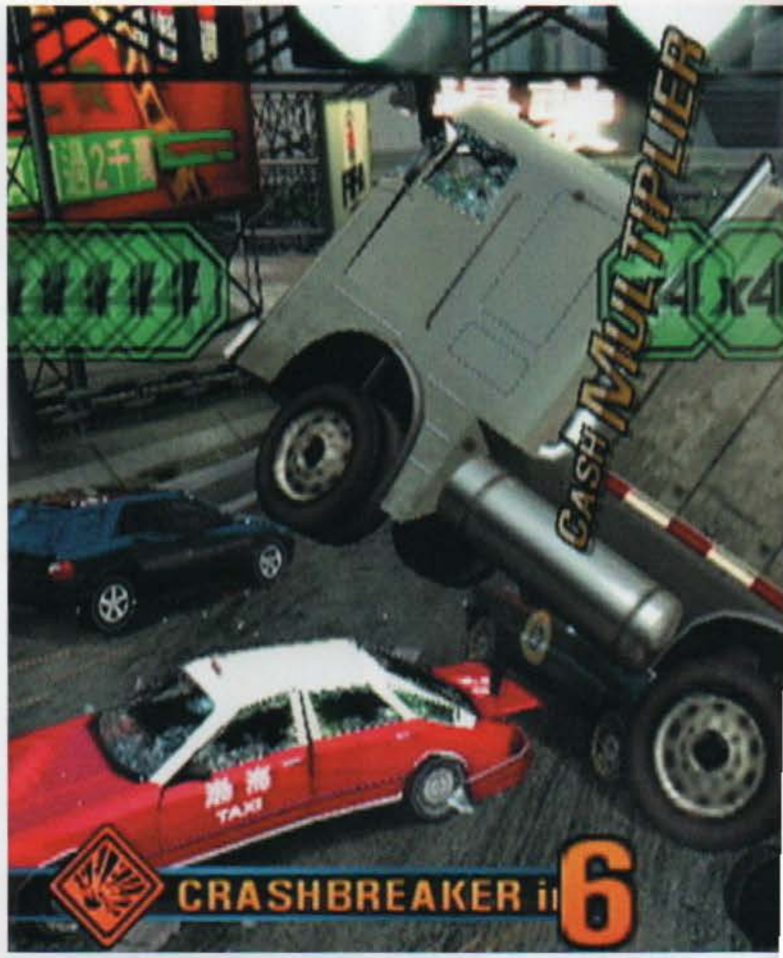

Burnout 3: Takedown

Format: **PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Criterion Games** Price: **£40** Release: **September 10**





One criticism would involve camera work. Crash mode replays rarely feature the most dramatic angle and the vision during Impact Time can be frustrating in the restrictions it puts on your view



The speed. Lord, the speed. *Takedown* could have the best environments yet seen in a racing title but you simply won't have time to notice them. The game's opening sections, even for seasoned *Burnout* aficionados, are utterly bewildering. There is a wealth of fresh information to take in – new road structures and a new driving dynamic thanks to immediate access to boost, regardless of whether the gauge is full or not, to name two – but it's the unusual velocity of the action that dazzles. You'll still be pondering how something can simultaneously feel so familiar and foreign when it hits you. Literally. You've barely managed 100 meters in your lowest-spec 160mph hot hatch and already the CPU competition is trying to bury you into the scenery or place you in the path of oncoming traffic. Not to be outwitted by the AI, you start to fight back, of course, and so begins the *Burnout 3* experience.

Now more complex and focused, Crash mode could easily present itself as a standalone product, so accomplished is its new form





Car models are far closer to their real life inspiration, and are far better for it

You'll already know that *Takedown* is all about aggressive driving. What you won't realise until you play it is how this shift in focus completely transforms the *Burnout* mechanic to the extent that it feels like an entirely different game. Racing takes a back seat to carnage as you face the fiercest opposition yet encountered in virtual racing. Let your primal instincts take over (they will whether you want them to or not) and it's not unusual to lose an event because you've become too involved in a race-long battle with the fifth-placed car to remember to fight your way to the front. It's only when you return to *Burnout 2* that you realise just how little CPU driver interaction there was before. Any notion of battling in *Takedown's* predecessor was clearly player interpretation – opponents display a determination to get to the finish line first, sure, but no interest in you. Here, they don't just want to get past you, they want to hurt you as they do so.

Consequently, you'd better hurt them first. The incentive, other than attack being the best form of defence, is boost. Every offensive move – side-swiping, side-scraping, tailgating, shunting – is rewarded with the stuff (as are evasive manoeuvres and the usual oncoming traffic, near misses and drift elements). And in the wonderfully satisfying event of crashing them out of your way, termed a 'Takedown', you extend (and fill) your boost bar. Get taken down yourself and you lose a section of your gauge.

Coming off worst in an encounter with the competition isn't the end of the argument, and nothing characterises the combative spirit of *Burnout 3* better than an Aftertouch Takedown. Holding down the A button during a crash invokes Impact Time, slowing down the action and allowing you control of your sliding wreck. You can use this lengthy opportunity (depending on momentum, Impact Time can often last beyond 20 seconds) to orchestrate complex crash combinations utilising the traffic and any structures around you, although nothing proves as satisfying as taking down one of your rivals. Except for multiple Aftertouch Takedowns, of course – as with deft timing and coordination (as well as a little luck), double, triple and even quadruple forms of this last-ditch offensive are perfectly achievable, and only further reinforce the













One great new addition to the Crash mode is the car-mounted bomb you can set off, allowing you to guide your wreck to find still more victims, or perhaps pick up that elusive x4 multiplier icon

mechanic's standing as one of the game's brilliant and defining inclusions.

Its origin, of course, lies in Crash mode. *Burnout 2*'s party game of choice returns vastly enhanced, the addition of ramps, pick-ups and the aforementioned aftertouch has evolved it as much as the injection of the combat dynamic into the main game has radically altered the essence of *Takedown*'s predecessors. Now more complex and focused in design, Crash mode could easily present itself as a standalone product, so accomplished is its new form.

Takedown is accomplished all round. The extent of the developer's proficiency can be seen in the way the revised structure focuses on player reward. It will see you bounced around the globe as much as you are on the track, with events opening across three territories and offering an engaging mix of activities (you get to sample the IndyCar racing early on, which is a nice touch). Then there are the little gameplay enhancements: the way the oncoming traffic's headlights are permanently on to help visibility; how the green chevrons from previous *Burnouts* have been replaced by clearer, yellow-hued alternatives; the period of amnesty afforded to the player when placed back in the path of a civilian vehicle following the camera's violent pan back from displaying a successful Takedown (an interruption which can be switched off, as you'd hope).

At a time when, to many, developers' continued preoccupation with realism has removed the element of fun that characterised early racers and first attracted them to the genre, *Takedown* offers up a gargantuan gulp of the highest racing octane.

Until you've blasted along the gently curved outline of its European motorways via a delicate balance of brake and steering input (the accelerator never anything other than flat to the pad), nitrous flowing, gaze fixed firmly on the distance through burning eyes you daren't shut while carving your way through traffic and trading paint with the competition at 200mph or more, you won't have delved deep into *Takedown*'s core.

It still possesses the series' trademark ability to deliver *Tempest*-like 'in the zone' moments of remarkable intensity unlike any of its contemporaries, but now comes with a confidently revised dynamic, marking this as Criterion Games' finest hour. Crucially, it's everything a racing videogame should be: a relentless, unwavering and phenomenal assault on the senses.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten





Team Takedown

Offline multiplayer offers the singleplayer's Race and Road Rage options, but for real mayhem head for the Crash-based modes. Team Crush sees you coordinating simultaneous automotive massacres with a partner on any of the game's 100 Crash junctions, while Double Impact has you competing to grab the most points and pick-ups. Party mode offers the more traditional one-at-a-time approach. If splitscreen isn't your thing, get online. We haven't yet been able to test this element, but it offers all of the above plus specific modes such as Team Road Rage, so expect it to deliver on its massive potential.

The Sims 2

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Electronic Arts** Developer: **Maxis** Price: **£40** Release: **September 17**





The Sims 2 is an advert for self improvement. The fitter and better read a Sim becomes, the more successful they will be in life. But they'll need to chill out and play some PC games, too





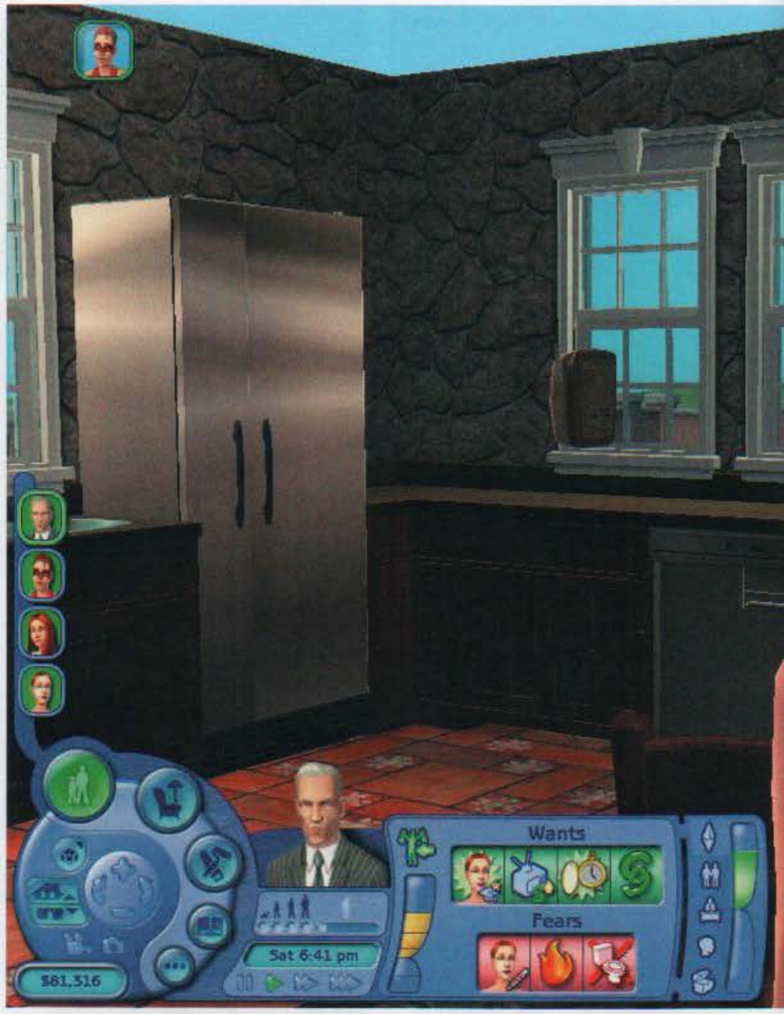
Facial expressions and gestures are all highly animate, giving you a good idea of the condition of a Sim before you even glance at the information bars

Who could have foretold that *The Sims* would become such a huge, singular hit? It has had few worthy competitors in its self-created genre, certainly none that can repeat its staggering financial success, and Maxis looks set to repeat this chart-topping accomplishment with its people-managing sequel. From the first few moments of chatting, flirting and interior decorating, *The Sims 2* is delightful.

A new 3D engine creates visuals worthy of modern PCs, but it also provides direct and immediate access to a simulation of modern domesticity that is both subtle and awesome in its complexity. Each Sim is a near-perfect virtual pet. Free-willed enough to go about their most mundane duties, they nevertheless require the beneficent hand of the gamer god to guide them to happiness, success and the occasional much-needed shower. This process of day-to-day 'living' now boasts considerably more depth and diversity than in *The Sims'* previous incarnation. Each Sim has a basic set of traits that will dictate their domestic habits and social propensities, but they also now have a set of wants and fears that will guide their overall mood within the parameters of an overall life-building aspiration.

A Sim's handful of immediate goals need to be addressed each and every day if they're going to feel successful. This might be as simple as having a chat with someone on MSN or having a couch bought for them. It might be a grander, more difficult endeavour, such as having an affair with a local beauty, or bringing home enough cash to afford some of the dazzling consumer luxuries (flatscreen TV, four-poster bed) that make a Sim's house a luxurious home.

Succeed in these and a Sim's mood improves, making them better at performing the tasks to follow. These goals undergo constant change within the overall aspiration of the Sim's life. A child might simply want to play, but will still need to interact with an adult so that homework can be aced and bedtime stories lovingly told, before they are genuinely happy. A maturing teenager, on the other hand, might need to get busty Lucy into the hot-tub while still finding time to hang out



with local Sim buddies. Watching him spurned for failing to balance these concerns may lead to his greatest fears being realised. If rejection by friends is his worst nightmare then his aspiration meter will plunge as they argue, and there will likely be tears or worse, so setting him right again will become an urgent priority. The range of options for providing for these needs, the actions the Sims can perform, the interactions that are possible, the careers that can be undertaken and the furnishings that can be purchased, makes up a bewildering array of possibilities.

General play consists of creating a family, putting them in a home and then developing their careers, relationships and environment in such a way that they will achieve their goals. The complexity of these tasks, along with a constant stream of storyline events and the possibilities of a whole neighbourhood of Sims living together, rapidly makes the scope of the game seem a little daunting. Ensuring that a busy 2.4-child family is running smoothly requires much attention, not least during social events such as parties (see 'Always party hard'). Moods will run high and fights or flings soon become inevitable.

All these events are designed to be as charming as possible – it's hard to dismiss the brilliance of the Sims joking and gossiping, or yelling and fighting. When two Sims lovingly clasp each other as they sleep, even the coldest gaming hearts will begin to melt. The Sims are all genuinely endearing, and this attachment makes all the labour of

When two Sims lovingly clasp each other as they sleep, even the coldest gaming hearts will begin to melt. The Sims are genuinely endearing















The range of activities the Sims can undertake is huge. Detailed TVs and chess sets add to the delight of watching them live their lives



managing their lives seem worthwhile. It's been said before, but the soap opera content of *The Sims* can quickly become more entertaining and more absurd than anything daytime TV can invent. Within moments of playing with one of the pre-built neighbourhoods the father of the family is juggling his relationship with his wife with his affair with the maid. Add two bickering teenage daughters to this volatile mix and it becomes quite clear why this is one stressed-out Sim. (Dealing with his predicament is a compelling challenge, especially when that maid is so cute...)

The Sims 2 simply drips with additional functions and features – not least of which is the movie-making interface, which allows players to record and edit moments of their Sim life to be kept as a video file and played back later. *Sims 2* players will be able to share their Sims stories with each other and to build up a life on film for their creations. Players are made to feel that they'll be able to achieve just about anything with the game, even though there's bound to be vast tracts of content to be added in expansion packs.

With all the arguments about videogame violence in the mainstream press, it's always pleasing to note that the biggest-selling modern PC game has been non-violent. Quietly rolling onwards with a highly accomplished project of sophisticated and emotive gaming, *The Sims 2* looks set to ensure that it stays that way.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Always party hard

The ambitious party can be a difficult event to get just right. It's even worse in Simsville and the result of a bad party can be devastating to the mood of the Sims involved. Get it right, win a fight and get intimate with the wealthy target of their affections, and the Sim's mood will soar. Points earned from successes can be spent on improving their environment. Get it all wrong, and the Sims will struggle with depression and damaged egos.

Second Sight

Format: **GC, PS2, Xbox (version tested)** Publisher: **Codemasters** Developer: **Free Radical** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**





Character designs are boldly drawn, well-dressed and full of personality. Wiry Vattic is particularly likeable. The stock NPCs lack variety, though

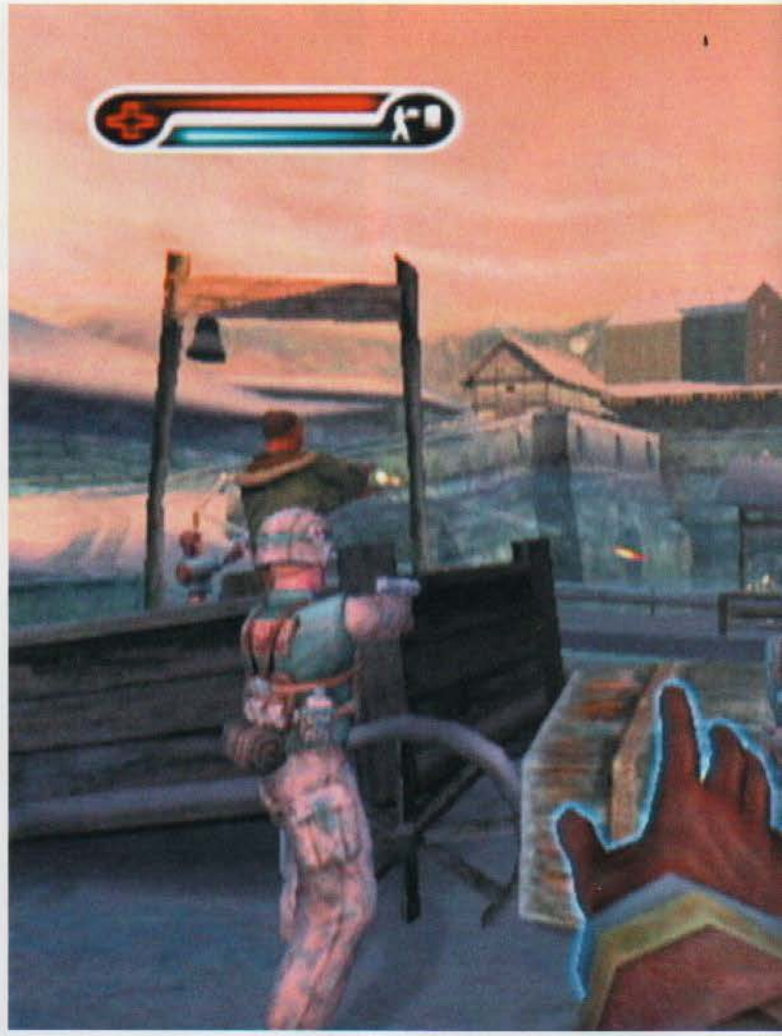
With *TimeSplitters* and its sequel, Free Radical's staff seemed to struggle deliberately against the prevailing trends in FPS and action games, trends that they themselves had helped create in their work at Rare on *GoldenEye* and *Perfect Dark*. Filmic style, narrative coherence and considered, tactical combat were all eschewed. In their place were frantic, twitchy arcade shooting and a charmingly silly kitchen-sink conceit that could accommodate every spoof and staple they could think of. The games were a defiantly uncool manifesto for a traditional gaming aesthetic (or lack of one), and though they divided opinion, many loved them for it.

So it's a surprise to find *Second Sight* sneaking out from under the noisy cover of EA's signing of *TimeSplitters 3*, for this paranormal spy thriller is all about stealth and story and a seamless, directed, singleplayer 'experience' – the very model of a modern videogame. Which is not to say that there's no family resemblance. *TimeSplitters* fans will feel at home with the funky flared character design, while the snowbound Russian base, the scattershot AK47 and the musical cues –

Crisp of cut-scene, Second Sight could well be a high water mark in storytelling through games (as opposed to storytelling around them)

even the telltale chirrup of the CCTV cameras – belong to an unbroken lineage stretching all the way back to *GoldenEye*. So cosy, so avuncular, so Britsoft.

The premise, the structure and the setting are all new, however, and substantially more voguish. Dr John Vattic awakes in a mysterious medical research facility to find he has amnesia and psychic powers – telekinesis, self-healing, shockwave attacks, projection of a ghost form and more. These







Coloured circles clearly indicate which objects and people can be targeted or manipulated. Drawing weapons and ammo from across the room in the middle of a firefight is a smug kick

are drip-fed to the player as Vattic makes his escape and investigates his own abduction, his past and his place in this web of intrigue coming back to him all the while in the form of punchy playable flashbacks. Handily, these include his secondment to a military special ops team and the attendant stealth and weapons training.

The plot is a pretty hokey sub-X-Files conspiracy, to be sure, but it's handled with genuine grace and economy, piquing and steadily rewarding interest without resorting to shock tactics or loudly telegraphed Big Secrets. Crisp of cut-scene, blessed with a refreshingly light touch and low-key compared to the po-faced chest-beating of its peers, *Second Sight* could well be a high water mark in storytelling through games (as opposed to storytelling around them). Its flashback technique recalls Silicon Knights' remarkable horror yarn *Eternal Darkness*, but it's far less grandiose, more focused in its application, and ultimately even more successful. Free Radical has taken to tale-spinning like the proverbial duck.

The same, sadly, cannot be said of its attempt at the ubiquitous stealth action. *Second Sight* lacks the radar or the camera flexibility for players to be aware of all threats to their secrecy. While it could be said that a certain level of frustration goes hand in hand with the quiet excitement of going unnoticed, that excitement is only there the first time, and endlessly restarting and replaying











Though relatively low-tech and parsimonious with the polys, *Second Sight*'s visuals are clean and have total coherence in style, as well as consistent levels of detail – and that's something remarkably few art teams achieve

sections of motionless hiding is the very opposite of entertaining. So is the alternative – skulking in cupboards to wait out repeated security alerts. That the most disheartening sneaking sections come early in the game – during Vattic's escape and before he has a full compliment of psi powers – is a critical error in pace that threatens to kill the game for many players.

Far more successful is the armed combat, some of the best in any thirdperson actioner to date. The essential lock-on system is complimented with the ability to finesse your aim vertically, bringing the rich satisfaction of the smoothly timed headshot to this perspective. The weapons are familiar and masterfully realised (see 'Snipe snobbery'), cover is easy and fun to use, and the resulting firefights are an evocative and generous thrill.

Second Sight's supposed USP – the psychic abilities – are a more mixed blessing. Occasionally fiddly, they are slow to reveal their potential, especially since their use is only very occasionally required, leaving it up to the player to discover how best to wield Vattic's brain power. It's also a great shame that telekinesis, which should be the standout power, is let down by some tinnily unconvincing and buggy physics (one of several areas, also including audio, in which the game feels a little low-rent and dated).

But then, just as Vattic approaches a godlike ability to manipulate his world in later stages, the player gets comfortable and finds that tactical options are blown wide open, timid tedium replaced by scope for genuinely creative and cruel improvisation. The rush of omnipotence is heady indeed, and finally, perhaps just a little too late, *Second Sight* adds up to more than the sum of its parts.

Caught between the superior psychic physics of *Psi-Ops* and the bigger, brassier stealth-opera of *Riddick*, *Second Sight* may get squeezed out. But it doesn't deserve to be. Despite its irritations and its occasionally threadbare set-dressing, this is a smart, fun, forward-thinking work, a tale well told, and a true British original.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten



Snipe snobbery

If the shotgun and pistol are the meat and potatoes of videogame gunplay, then the sniper rifle is its haute cuisine: a refined, dramatic, guilty pleasure for the diner, and a chance for the chefs to show off. Happily, the expert virtual gunsmiths at Free Radical are more than up to integrating this headshot hedonism with locked-on thirdperson combat. An inset scope prevents a jarring perspective shift; a slow zoom on your prey teases the tastebuds; give those wandering crosshairs a judicious tweak and bang, the full flavour hits. Mmm.

Tales Of Symphonia

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **$50 (£27)** Release: **Out now (US), Q4 (UK)**















The game supports up to four players, who can slot in and out throughout your adventure. It's a slightly fiddly and dismally unexplained process, however, and the camera doesn't cope at all well

Early on in *Tales Of Symphonia*, you'll start to get the feeling it's played more RPGs than you have. "Oh, man," sighs Lloyd at the end of another dungeon. "Can't they just warp us back to the exit?" His companions eye him narrowly, but you'll chuckle in recognition. It's a dangerous step, however, because it makes it harder to forgive when the game falls back on lazy genre standards.

As is traditional in the *Tales* series, this is a game based around active, realtime battles. Leave your companions on autopilot, and take control of your favourite: leaping, blocking and comboing to bring the bad guy down. Which isn't to say that you sacrifice any of the classic RPG battle tactics. There are elaborate AI settings to tweak, elemental resistance to consider, moves to power up and unison attacks to plan. Much of this can be altered in battle, so the rhythm bounces between all-out hacking and slashing to pensive forward thinking with a flick of the pause button. It's a satisfying and often stunning spectacle, and one which still reveals subtleties hours into the game.

The story, which starts with a predictable quest-in-peril setup, soon expands to genuinely epic proportions, spanning generations and taking in themes of racism and identity. Its telling, however, is hampered by the form. In-engine cut-scenes and odd manga-inspired excerpts add detail and a strong sense of character, but the plot is revealed in awkward lumps which never quite dovetail. There's no question, however, that Namco has managed to twist out a tale that sustains your interest across both discs.

Normally, being needlessly elongated is the kiss of death for RPGs, but *Symphonia* lasts the distance. Each dungeon has a wonderfully distinct visual style as well as a unique puzzle system, which is as likely to depend on summoning helper fish as detonating rockfalls. However, the challenges themselves aren't always perfectly pitched – alongside those that perplex just enough there are many that swing between the blandly obvious and the bafflingly obtuse.

All this makes it galling when the game sends you on needless fetch-and-carry missions, when early exploration earns you a 'we can't go here now' and when the menu system reveals its frustrations. Ultimately, though, Namco has played – or at least made – more RPGs than you have, and here, for once, it shows.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten

Conflict: Vietnam

Format: PC, PS2 (version tested), Xbox Publisher: SCi Developer: Pivotal Games Price: £40 Release: September 3 Previously in E135

There are differences between *Conflict: Vietnam* and the previous two *Conflict: Desert Storm* games, the kind you expect. Parched, open-plan desert landscapes are replaced by tight jungle. Cool professionalism and surgical campaigns are replaced by hysteria, profanity, licensed music, bungled offensives and numerous ambushes. And the look of such a leafy, verdant battlefield has been captured well, with lush, tangled corridors of plants and huge, protruding leaves brushing against your squad as they skulk in the undergrowth. It's not technically spectacular, but the layers of impenetrable foliage and excellent sound design help give the game a humid and cloying atmosphere.

But the appeal of the *Desert Storm* games lies in the combination of reliable squad behaviour and a palpable sense of being able to apply strategy simply and effectively – laying down fields of fire, gaining ground and covering the angles – and it's this fluid functionality that seems to have been lost in *Conflict*'s latest tour of duty; it's still there, but rarely allowed to come into use.

Your team spends most of each level being funnelled along narrow jungle paths. It may be a fitting setting, but it's one that doesn't lend itself much to strategy. Groups of Viet Cong seem to spawn from every angle nigh-on continuously and, while your soldiers follow orders quickly and efficiently, they seem to be unable to take down an enemy in the middle distance without spending an entire clip. Again, this may be faithful to the firearms of the time, but this not only leads to ammo running dry all too quickly, but also a reluctance to split up your team as they seem unable to fortify any position singlehandedly.

The pacing, thanks to a combination of necessary haste and the weakness of your divided squad members, feels more akin to a corridor shooter; there's a constant sensation of feeling harried and hemmed in. Again, it fits the setting, but doesn't play to the strengths of the game's framework. There are moments when the sturdiness of that framework surfaces, and it becomes hugely enjoyable, but all too quickly it recedes, lost in the noise of deliberately unwieldy, insurmountable situations. With too much of the game reduced to what feels like a chain of frustrating pushes, then, scratch up one more victory for the thorny territory of the Vietnam war, and one more casualty (see *ShellShock Nam '67*) for videogames.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









Booby traps feature, and must be disarmed to allow the squad to progress. Bonus objectives also emerge as you progress, allowing you to perform duties in return for more experience





Just as the game redeems itself with an excellent down-river section – all four soldiers manning a mounted gun on an armoured boat – it throws a frustrating escort mission your way



SOS

Like the previous games, you're given two save points to use whenever you wish. Often, though, thanks to the chaotic nature of the campaign, the apparent end of the level is anything but, as new objectives get added in a last-minute blitz. It's quite possible to get unwittingly marooned halfway through a mission, where restarting it with these hidden objectives in mind seems far more bearable than having to run a punishing and unintentional gauntlet to get to the end of the stage.

Tenchu Kurenai

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **From Software** Developer: **K2/From Software** Price: **¥6,800 (£33)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (UK)**

Previously in **E**139









K2's SNK heritage is clear in the style and concept of boss fights (top) but there's neither the time nor a clear enough view for anything but dodges and button-mashing











Some of the original *Tenchu*'s level layouts are revisited, and they bolster an already strong level design. Oversaturated colours abound, an obvious improvement over the largely washed-out *WOH*

Tenchu has always been a singular vision in search of a game to do it justice. Neither its original nor current developer have ever quite pulled off its skewed, uniquely affecting Kabuki show without a hitch, but then the contrast of brooding stealth and furious duels, careful forethought and twitch reaction, sober period piece and wild flight of fancy was never going to be easy to stage.

These all feature in *Kurenai* (often to more vivid effect than ever before), but also reprised is *Wrath Of Heaven*'s engine, with all the problems that entails. Most prominent are a camera almost wilfully determined to break the game and crippling slowdown as alerted enemies' AI routines clash with the processor-gobbling graphic density of outdoor levels.

That AI remains near-negligible, although it's compensated for with considerably more interesting enemy placement and sheer weight of numbers – many guards patrol in pairs, at once a warning and a murderous invitation to attempt the new double stealth kill. As for the levels, they're generally smaller, more intimate affairs than in *WOH* and, while their Lego-block construction is still obvious, an overwhelming profusion of detail – wreaths of mist coalescing in arctic moonbeams, leaves scattering through hazy lamplight – are an object lesson in detached beauty.

Beauty, but not functionality. Each beam of light or crawling shadow is hand-drawn, as insubstantial as the traces of desperate red your blades describe through the air, and make little contribution to gameplay. A stealth game where light and darkness are largely irrelevant may seem obsolete in Sam Fisher's long, perfectly modelled shadow – but *Tenchu* was never a game about skulking in corners.

Rather, *Kurenai* is at its richest when you're moving with relentless determination from ground to sky and back again, leaving a swathe cut through the enemy ranks almost as an aside. Few games can capture the sense of being in the hunt so well, and by degrees few games can disappoint so much when this sense is lost to wrangling with the camera or gawkish, unpredictable controls shackling your weightlessness.

In terms of atmosphere and intent, this is the best *Tenchu* yet, but it's still painfully lacking. It's apparent K2 understands and cares deeply for the experience *Tenchu* can provide, but the next instalment must deliver it in a fashion that convinces a wider audience to do the same.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

The killing game

As in *WOH*, extra abilities are unlocked through stealth kills, but *Kurenai* adjusts the formula by awarding a number of scrolls depending on the severity of the assassination. An indicator briefly flares up at the perfect moment, and launching a stealth kill in time earns the maximum possible scrolls, in addition to adding a grisly moment-of-impact highlight to the already savage sequences.

Headhunter: Redemption

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **Sega** Developer: **Amuze** Price: **£40** Release: **September 3**

It's a shame, really. If *Headhunter*'s controls were as coherent as its looks, it could've made for one of the greatest action adventure games of recent times. Instead, we're left with a clunky shooting gallery that is, in parts, a likeable gunfighting game.

But first, those visuals. Bleached and ghostly, like everything has been coated in some kind of radioactive Vaseline, *Headhunter*'s future world doesn't just ripple with a haunting glow, but manages to hang together well as a style, with a continuous sense of location. This adds to the ambience – reinforced by an excellent score – of a crafted atmosphere, but it's swiftly deflated by your first accident-prone shootout.

Gunplay is at its best when you confront enemies in a tight corridor. Locking on is performed by a reticule that hovers around a target before zeroing in – the stiller you are, the faster the zoom. Similarly, keeping yourself moving will throw your opponent's aim off to make you a tricky target. When you're involved in combat while leaning around a corner, this makes the game feel like a tidy *Time Crisis* homage, one where you feel tangibly in control of the situation. Shame it's tarnished by the fact that the enemy still seems to be able to hit you despite your body being out of view. Not even waist-high boxes can be used to create any effective cover.

Outside of bearable wall stealthing, however, *Headhunter*'s control scheme is a giddy mess, with indecisive functions that can't differentiate between you wanting to pick up something or climb on to a box, and a lock-on so swerving that it can't decide between a nearby enemy and one in the middle distance with any amount of useful speed. Shootouts in open areas become farcical, as your character spins and twitches to face an opponent you'd inadvertently turned towards due to the combination of oversensitive handling and, once you attempt to lock on, an inflexible camera. At times, your character's aim seems preoccupied with the scenery rather than the dangerous man with the gun several feet away.

While the game is paced well, its puzzles don't serve it any. Mostly, they involve scanning the scenery for a lock or a bolt to shoot off. Perversely, you're not allowed to shoot scenery until you've managed to scan it. All this helps turn what could have been a flowing and well-realised adventure into a fractured, patchwork garble.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









Most boss encounters can be solved by using an adrenaline booster – effectively giving you temporary invincibility – and then charging at them with a whole clip of machine gun fire





Lining up with a ladder is often far trickier than it ever should be, as lead character Leeza – backed up with communication from mentor and *Headhunter* star Jack Wade – handles so loosely



The Below Job

As a testament to the strength of *Headhunter*'s plot, the game features a 'Citizen's Media Bank', which contains the typical unlockable galleries of artwork. However, it also includes a number of colourful, satirical commercials created to enforce the sensation of corporate domination within the 'Above' – the section of society that exists above ground – including a porn-styled ad for recruitment work in the underworld – The 'Below' Job.

DJ: Decks & FX

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **SCEE** Developer: **Relentless** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now**

Previously in **E**140









Knob-fiddling is one of the more creative and satisfying ways to use the software: a mix is tangibly energised by a sudden bass kick







The cross fader can be smoothly moved with a stick, and the equipment looks like the real thing and works in much the same way. Everything, that is, except the record bag, which remains sadly static

Edge doesn't review music. The appreciation and analysis of videogames can be subjective enough without having to consider the complex emotional response to music. It's therefore probably best to make it clear from the start that our musical tastes do not include Judge Jules-esque MOR house.

This is perhaps a shame as, musically speaking, that's all *DJ: Decks & FX* has to offer. Otherwise, it does exactly what its name would suggest, providing would-be DJs with a pair of decks, a selection of effects and a bag of records. Rather than interpreting the *idea* of mixing tunes and making new music from the mixing, *DJ: Decks & FX* is instead an utterly literal translation of a real-world DJ set up.

Virtual records are placed on virtual decks, and any difference in beats per minute are accounted for automatically. Indicators at the top of the screen show the progression of the records bar by bar, allowing the tracks' start points to be matched visually as well as by ear. Meanwhile a sampler allows for sections of the music currently playing to be stored and repeated indefinitely.

There are a handful of effects (flange, pan, filters and so on) that can be comprehensively controlled and applied to any of the channels, along with a mixer with equalisers and kill switches that is exactly the same in form and function to the real article.

And it all works perfectly well. Navigation is smooth, and where appropriate the analogue sticks are used to simulate the movement of knobs and sliders. There are no issues with the technical implementation here: the problem lies in the banal and limited selection of records on offer. It's bland house or nothing, and as there's no option to add new tunes to a hard drive, unless you have a love for the narrow selection on offer, it's nigh-on useless.

It's difficult to make a judgement on this title as it's both utterly niche and absolutely perfectly realised. The complete lack of musical variety can easily be seen as a limitation of the software – all the included songs are of an extremely similar BPM and identical time signature, as variation would have made the automatic beat matching significantly more difficult.

Ultimately, *DJ: Decks & FX* is little more than an interactive mix album, and an unadventurous one at that. We'll have to see how the property is developed.

Edge rating: Five out of ten

U-Move Super Sports

Format: **PlayStation2 (EyeToy required)** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£33)** Release: **Out now (Japan), September 24 (UK)**

Eye Toy: Play's success brought with it a clear genre opening. With the camera in over three million homes across Europe, thirdparty publishers were presented with the opportunity to build on Sony's success. This is Konami's attempt at that, a collection of sport-themed minigames which doesn't so much build on *Play* as rip off the concept wholesale. So, the player stands in front of the camera, things move around on screen, and the player (usually) tries to touch them. And so on, until the player falls over or onlookers die laughing.

As with *Play*, some of *U-Move*'s games are better than others. The one that sees you playing baseball is well executed, particularly if you've got an empty tube of Pringles to hand; the saving penalties one is good, simple, stupid, fun. Most, though, are far too easy, and maybe that's because (going by the front-of-box screenshots, at least) *U-Move* is aimed squarely at children. That's not to say it's bad – even when *Play* was at its simplest, it was still fun, particularly with those laughing friends – but it's certainly a difficult purchase to justify if you already own *Play*.

Edge rating: Five out of ten









Like *Play* and *Groove* before it, *U-Move* works on motion detection, rather than colour recognition. Difficulty depends largely on your lighting – if your world's dimly lit, expect to do a lot of violent waving to score even a handful of points

Ape Escape EyeToy

Format: **PlayStation2 (EyeToy required)** Publisher: **SCEI** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£33)** Release: **Out now (Japan), TBC (UK)**

Previously in **E**140



The graphics are impeccable, using the waving-in-circles input cues from *Play*, while much of each menu screen carries irrelevant but satisfying interaction opportunities, and the characterisation is of the high standard we've come to expect from the *Ape Escape* team





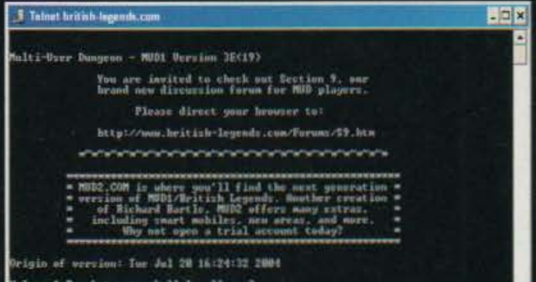


At least this month's other EyeToy game, *Ape Escape EyeToy*, has the good grace to steal from two different places. The *Play*-style pick-a-minigame element is still present, but the central part of the experience is a multiplayer *Mario Party* clone. It's a solid dynamic, if thoroughly pointless and soulless with only one player – that's a criticism that could be levelled at *Play*, too, and as such the addition of coherent competition is a positive thing.

The minigames, of which there are 30, are fractionally less developed than *Play*'s, but no less entertaining and must be unlocked by competing in the board game, which may prove a chore. Different approaches to the camera-as-input ethic include *Track & Field*-style races (running and hurdling logs) and steering a rolling boulder around a winding course. There's also simultaneous multiplayer competition, which in fourplayer means serious crowding around the screen. It sort of works, in a stupid, chaotic kind of way, which is fine because these games are about stupid chaos, and *Ape Escape* is different enough from its rivals to warrant interest from regular party gamers.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten

*Kill







The making of…

MUD

The opportunity to create an entirely new style of entertainment is granted to a hallowed few, but with the creation of MUD the concept of massively multiplayer online gaming was born

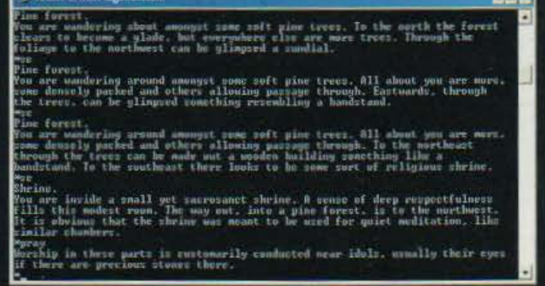
It was four scant years after *Pong* first made it into homes across the world, and decades brfore the advent of the world wide web, that the first massively multiplayer online roleplaying game made its debut. And yet, despite the rudimentary equipment upon which it relied, its greatest problems were not technical in nature. Suicides, unverified wills, conscientious objectors and sex-change operations all figure large in the 26-year history of *Multi-User Dungeon* – a history that has seen it create an entire industry and name a genre yet stay relatively anonymous to the wider gaming world.

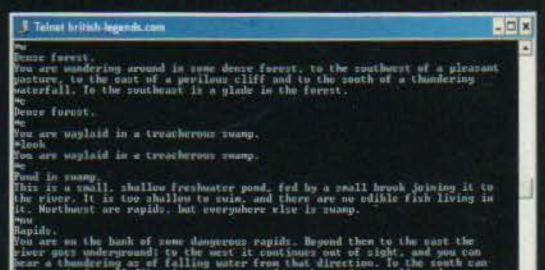
Unlike many classic titles, there is no difficulty to be had in experiencing *MUD* as it was originally conceived and enjoyed. Enter the address telnet://british-legends.com:27750/ into your web browser and you can play the original version of *MUD1*, just as it was seen and used in 1983 (or try telnet://mudii.co.uk/ for *MUD2*).

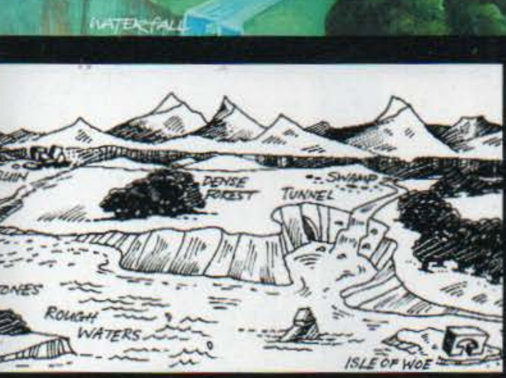
Although even now the description is rarely attributed to it *MUD* is, to all intents and purposes, an MMORPG. Entering the game, you are thrown into a principally benign fantasy world in which you can choose to gain experience by fighting monsters, explore peaceably or simply interact with other users.

Beast









Richard Bartle (now, below left, in 1983, below right) no longer handles the day-to-day life of *Multi-User Dungeon*, working instead as a development consultant and game design lecturer at Essex University







Original format: **DECsystem-10**
Publisher: **MUSE (Multi-User Entertainment Ltd)**
Developer: **Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1978**



Another detail from the *MUD1* colour poster. Bartle claims to still have thousands of copies, and will distribute them for free to fans if they contact him via his website (www.mud.co.uk) and send a stamped self-addressed A5 envelope

Created before the advent of animated graphics, the world was visualised entirely through short text descriptions, used a text-only interface, and managed to create almost all of the core functionality and gameplay conceits that would only be rediscovered by *EverQuest* and its ilk decades later.

In 1978 **Richard Bartle** was in his first year at Essex University. After meeting with Roy Trubshaw he became interested in the older student's work trying to create a multiplayer version of *Adventure* (the first text adventure to be widely disseminated around the world).

"Roy had found a mechanism for writing to shared memory on the DECsystem-10 mainframe," recalls Bartle. "This meant that two instances of the same program could communicate with one another instantly, without having to use files."

Trubshaw created the very first version of *MUD* on his own, handing over completion of the third iteration to Bartle when his degree course ended. "When I took it over from Roy it wasn't really a game, although we all called it one," explains Bartle. "I made a conscious decision to 'gamify' it so that people could play it as a game if they wanted. I felt that if people had a reason to play then they might pick up on the freedom aspects, too. I wanted to create a place where people could have fun. I didn't want a traditional, directed kind of game – I wanted something as freeform as possible. The idea was to provide the structure and the rules, but make it completely open-ended."

Although the world itself was not persistent in the strictest sense (inventory objects are reset every few days), player statistics were and the ability to play the game via ARPANET, the emergent global network that would eventually become the internet we know today, gave *MUD* all the attributes of a modern MMORPG.

At this point a deal was signed with BT to set up a company (MUSE Ltd) and to write a fourth version of the software, which would become known as *MUD2*. Although it included all the content of *MUD1* it featured a larger world to explore and an expanded language parser.

A necessarily brief description of the increasingly bizarre series of events and people that then prevented *MUD* from achieving its true commercial potential are explained here elsewhere (see 'MUD: the opera') but, in short, the game was never really visible to the public at large, either in the UK or the US, so its major influence continued to be with hardcore hobbyists. The term MUD itself became the name for a whole genre of titles that used the same basic concept and interface to create new experiences using every theme possible, from science-fiction to pornography.

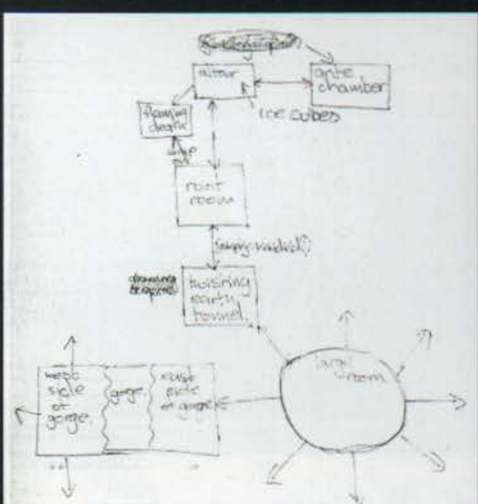
"MUDs in general did very well," says Bartle. "They owned ten per cent of the bits on the internet in 1994, before the word wide web. *MUD2* was tied up with contract problems at the time, though, so we didn't make the $1million a month that some other virtual worlds were making during that golden age."

Deeply in debt

The advent of graphical MMORPGs such as *Meridian 59* and *EverQuest* appeared to signal a whole new era of social gaming, but their debt to *MUD* was deeper than some may assume. "Design decisions Roy and I made for *MUD* have been passed down unaltered through generations of virtual worlds, often without designers even realising that they had a choice in the matter," says Bartle.

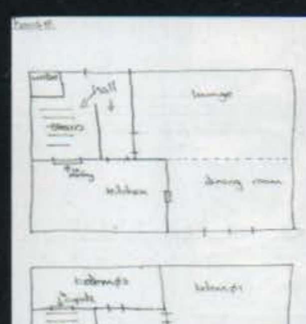
"The level system, for example, which I introduced into *MUD1* only after considering several alternatives,

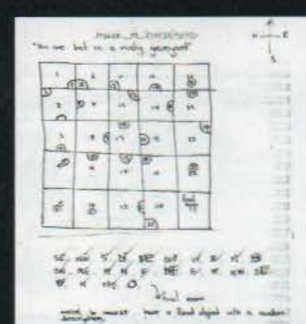
"Design decisions for *MUD* have been passed down unaltered through generations of virtual worlds, often without designers even realising that they had a choice"





Above is another original design by Roy Trubshaw, this time of the tunnels beneath the yew tree. The screenshot shows the command list from *MUD1*. The game is referred to as *British Legends* – the name given to it by CompuServe to explain the British spelling





On the left is an original map of one of the game's indoor areas drawn by Roy Trubshaw when he designed *MUD1*. The diagram on the right is his original design for the maze of tombstones

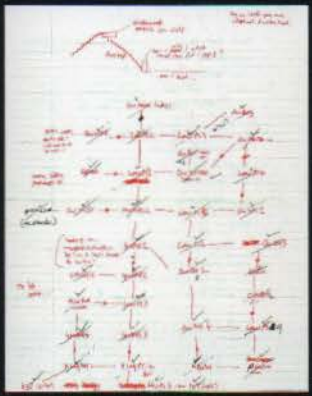
MUD: the opera

To describe *MUD*'s commercial history as 'troubled' is an understatement of gigantic proportions.

Simon Dally, the initial impetus behind MUSE, provided an early problem when a bout of manic depression saw him steal £800,000 worth of antiquarian books, empty MUSE's bank account and shoot himself dead. Arguments over his will ensured that his shares in the company had to be bought from two of his brothers at considerable cost rather than see the firm fold.

In America, the attempts of Engage (Interplay's online division) to add a graphical frontend to the game were frustrated when the first choice of programmer transpired to have no green card and the second, who was a pacifist, left the company after his conscience objected to his working on some of Interplay's more violent titles. Things became no easier when disagreements over worldwide exclusivity lead to a suicide attempt from one of the UK operators. Meanwhile, attempts by Rick Mulligan, one of *MUD*'s champions in the US, to counter Engage's more unpleasant corporate machinations were limited by his frequent absence from their offices as he underwent gender reassignment therapy. When he finally left the company in disgust, as Jessica Mulligan, Engage had pulled the plug on *MUD* altogether and it was Wireplay's turn to add to the disappointment…

For further details consult Bartle's website at http://www.mud.co.uk/muse/backgrnd.htm





Bartle designed most of *MUD* using the style of the map on the right, only occasionally resorting to a network of nodes, as seen in the original design for the Dwarven Citadel on the left. *MUD* fans tended to favour the latter method, due to its straightforward lack of ambiguity

does not get the same degree of consideration in new virtual worlds. They think 'How many levels shall we have?' rather than 'Shall we have levels?' yet a level system for a virtual world only really makes sense if there's an end to it – a point at which you can say you've won and stop playing it like a game."

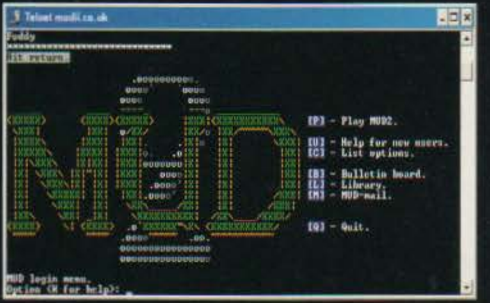
Bartle is admirably reluctant to pick out any other examples, for fear of self-aggrandisement, but there certainly does seem to be more incestuous behaviour within the MMORPG world than perhaps any other genre – with the programmers of *DIKU MUD* even going as far as forcing the developers of *EverQuest* to sign a sworn statement that the two did not share any source code.

It's difficult to know whether the fact that massively multiplayer online games have advanced so little is a proud testament to *MUD*'s seminal design or a sad indictment of the lack of imagination in other developers. Of course, the most obvious difference between *MUD* and more modern games is the use of graphics, but it is unfair to consider this an inadequacy on *MUD*'s part. "I think you get a better sense of being in the world if it's in text; the effect of having a constant medium, rather than a mixed one, helps in that regard too," says Bartle. "Text is more expressive than graphics. It's also more descriptive – there are no smells in *EverQuest*.

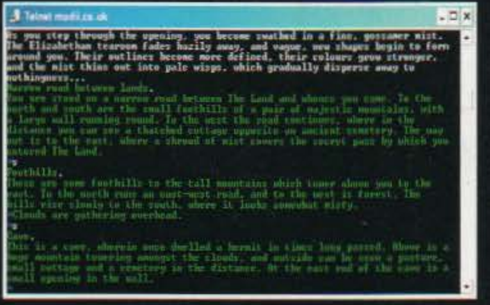
"With text, I can talk to the mind. With graphics, I can only talk to the senses. I can get more depth out of text than I ever could out of graphics. I think text can be more evocative overall than graphics, but that doesn't mean I don't think graphics can't be evocative, or that in some areas their evocativeness can't exceed that of text."

Although Bartle has no plans to add graphics to *MUD* ("Adding graphics would be as pointless as illustrating War And Peace") he does still have an interest in experimenting with new technology in the genre. As he points out: "I'm more likely to be able to get a grant to develop a virtual world for academic purposes than I am to get a publisher to stump up the kind of sums necessary for commercial success.

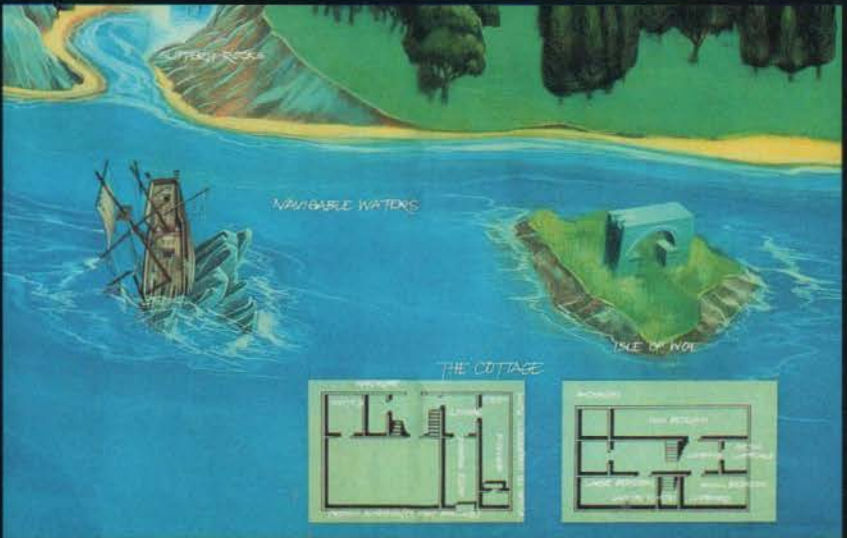
"It doesn't really matter anyway. Roy and I planted an acorn, the tree grew, it produced other acorns, these grew, and now we have a forest. Those trees will continue to grow irrespective of anything I do. I can plant another tree, sure, but these days I'd rather focus on the health of the forest than on individual trees."







MUD2 featured coloured text – the only significant graphical upgrade in the franchise's 26-year history. The map of the *MUD2* world was created from an original sketch by Richard Bartle and appeared in the September 1984 issue of Micro Adventurer



A detail from a colour poster of *MUD1* which was given out as part of the *MUD2* starter kit. Note that, except for the specific schematic of the cottage, the map only gives a general idea of the location of the game's other landmarks

RESET

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 76, October 1999

Come closer, and we'll tell you a story, or at least give you an image. Peter Molyneux, holding a plant. In a supermarket. With Jeremy Longley, who's about to purchase a French loaf and a pineapple, and the Carter brothers queuing impatiently behind with a bottle of champagne and some Bunny Brunch. Welcome to **E**76, replete with paparazzi-style photography; Guildford was painted as 'Silicon Valley, UK', and a plethora of software stars were herded down to the local Tesco for our take on supermarket sweep. Were the contents of the trolleys clues to the ex-Bullfrog crowd's future output? We can't say for sure – could coffee and pasta really be code for *Fable*? – but at least there aren't any *visible* red herrings.

Retail work of a more relevant nature provided the theme for the issue; Sega's Dreamcast was right on the cusp of launch in Europe, but things were already beginning to look a little awkward.

Damned by Gary Penn as a "Milky Way" – a catchy, killer soundbite that would haunt Sega UK until its systems were being shrinkwrapped in Poundland – the 128bit console was nevertheless favourably viewed in our cover feature. On its opening spread the article immediately offered 'six solid reasons for buying into the dream', under headings of 'Power', 'Connectivity' (what other console had a modem?), 'Software support' (300 titles were in development), 'UK respect' (60Hz modes), 'No competition' and 'Price' (£200 at launch).

Perhaps **Edge** really did kill the Dreamcast, after all, simply by being too positive about it.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?
"It's hard to see Dreamcast as anything other than a Milky Way: a snack to consume between PlayStations – without ruining appetites" Gary Penn condemns the DC in a swift, prescient soundbite.

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?
'If gamers really want such shallow entertainment, they need only watch Channel 5'. It's improved quite a bit since then, of course. Hasn't it?

TESTSCREEN SCORES
TrickStyle (DC; 8/10), Soul Calibur (DC; 9/10), Shadowman (PC/N64; 8/10), C&C: Tiberian Sun (PC; 7/10), Unreal Tournament (PC; 7/10), Darkstone (PC; 6/10), Airforce Delta (PC; 7/10), RC Stunt Copter (PS; 4/10)


1


2


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5


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7


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9


10

1. The men of Guildford go snack-hunting in Tesco
2. *TrickStyle*: 'a refreshing slant on the racing game'
3. *Tekken* vitamin drinks...
4. And *Pac-Man* noodles. A scouring of Tokyo's stores had returned some oddities.
5. 'Fortress **Edge**' is destroyed in *Team Fortress*
6. Capcom fights big robots in *Kikaio*, AKA *Tech Romancer*
7. The future of gaming?
8. Yuji Naka thinks so
9. And so does Bill Gates, at least for the moment
10. Ultimately, Sony's evolution would prove more comfortable than Sega's revolution

inbox

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW
Or email (stating 'Inbox' in the message header):
edge@futurenet.co.uk

Another controversy swells up around violent videogames and their effect on the youngsters who are too young to legally play them.

I was once on the side of Rockstar and the critics who smiled wryly at the hysterics of The Daily Mail and put it all down to a conservative fear of anything new and beloved of the young. But while I don't request an outright ban on videogames which feature such extreme depictions of murder and mutilation, I'm beginning to lose sympathy with those on the liberal side of this debate. And *Manhunt* is only the most tasteless of that grisly hall of fame which fills me with little more than disgust.

With the likes of *State Of Emergency*, *Kingpin* and *Soldier Of Fortune*, developers have stepped away from realistic, unflinching depictions of violence and into a realm of fetishism. It's now about indulging the darkest fascinations of the player and if not awakening, certainly nurturing a desire to witness the most inventively vicious scenes of killing that can be provided. The tactile component of videogame design adds a new sensory element, an involvement that leaps beyond mere perception and which movies can't reproduce. And despite the now-tedious protestations that these games weren't designed for youngsters, it's hard to deny that the young are the most likely by far to find these games appealing. They fulfil only the most immature definitions of 'adult entertainment'. If you had asked me at the age of 14 what I consider to be a grown-up movie, I would have replied RoboCop, Predator or any other 18-rated blockbuster with a level of violence that would have seen me turned away in disappointment from my local cinema. Ask me to define 'adult' at 29, and the first movie to enter my head would likely involve Woody Allen and a scenario so contemplative that it warrants at most a 12 certificate.

That's not to say most readers of this magazine should be whiling away the hours with an interactive take on Manhattan, but I'd like to bet that, when handed a game like *Manhunt*, an **Edge** staffer would immediately put its gruesomeness into perspective, boxing it off as just the latest, most provocative chapter in the ongoing saga of digitised brutality. In the adult mind, things have their place and stay there, even if they do intrigue. It's different for adolescents: they're chomping at the bit precisely because of the offensive graphic content. You could even say it's the sign of an active young mind that it should want to be taken to places it's never been before, exposed to newer and more vivid sensations.

What the public and mainstream press need to see right now is a drawing of lines within the industry, maybe not an admission that things have gone too far but at least the assertion that standards could be set higher, that as a creative form gains increasing visibility it can branch out with an aspirational mindset rather than submitting to a puerile fixation on causing outrage simply because it is able to. It's callow and hypocritical to despair of public opposition to a game's violent content when that content has been designed to zone in on people's unease and court notoriety from the outset.
Dion Yates

Thanks for all your letters on this topic. (There were tons.) We'll look into this area in a future edition.

With regard to the seemingly endless hand wringing encountered in the letters pages of **Edge** about the lack of acceptance given to games in the so-called 'mainstream' (whatever that stands for these days) I thought in reading this article (www.comic-con.org/Pages/CCIEisner04Chabon.html) one could draw plenty of parallels with the comics world and that of games – in fact you could simply replace many of the examples given with game-specific items. (I think you know the ones.)

Frankly, as a gamer since year dot, I have no trouble whatsoever with the apparent lack of critical acceptance of the games field. I don't need to feel comfortable reading **Edge** on the bus (not that I don't) or expect others to wax lyrical over *Ico*. It's enough for me to enjoy them. Sure, there are the odd occasions where I'd like to share some particularly stunning example with a close friend and they simply don't understand, but in the main it remains a private passion, and no less for it.

It's constantly compared with film, which has meticulous and agonised-over reviews of its more creative and celebrated output, while game reviews in general, appear to remain, frankly, feeble-minded (present company excepted, naturally). Well, it's a poor example at best – how can you compare a static seated experience taking, say, two hours with a gaming one taking 20, 30 or 40 hours and upwards, with all its many little quirks and controls to be learned beforehand?

In any case I could go on, but I won't. Suffice it to say I think that those feeling aggrieved that more people don't understand gaming are missing the point somewhat. Is it them needing the acceptance, rather than gaming?
Robert Stark

I have complained to you about games' storytelling in the past, but Steven Poole brings forward interesting points in **E**139, namely concerning story structure and reader/gamer tolerance. It is this I'd like to add to somewhat. I've always found it curious that games are so compared to movies, while they also contain a lot of parallels with books. Writers also seek to keep books interesting for eight or more hours, but they sure do a better job keeping their audience hooked until the end. There are more than 2,000 years of ideas on the subject of stories and telling them, and it'd be foolish for the industry to ignore them.

For one: in his preface to Bagombo Snuff Box, Kurt Vonnegut wrote his rules for creative writing, and they sure stir up interesting thoughts when applied to gaming. So let's see:

1. *Use the time of a gamer in such a way that he or she will not feel that time was wasted.*

Well, amen to that.

2. *Give the gamer at least one character he or she can root for.*

Games contain many parallels with books. Writers also seek to keep books interesting for eight or more hours, but they sure do a better job keeping their audience hooked until the end



René Kneyber salutes *Far Cry*'s excellent enemy soldiers, whose existence and behaviour gives the game's action a more believable atmosphere

Think about it. Almost every game you liked had a character you went for, be it Guilty Spark in *Halo*, Slippy in *StarFox Adventures* or whoever. It adds to a game infinitely if there is an emotional response to a character. If the gameplay is crap, nice characters will partly make up for it.

3. *Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water.*

Far Cry shows a premature version of this concept. Some of the NPCs are fishing, some are talking, some are patrolling. Games expand when adding a psychological reality to it. Nowadays we have characters whose sole purpose it is to respond to you. In *Far Cry* we can have the sense we are intervening in someone's life, that we are messing up a system that is there. And think about all those RPGs with characters simply waiting for you in the pub to return their ring to them, day and night, month after month! If characters are to be a part of a story so long they should have far more depth – even if only meeting them occasionally.

4. *Every sentence must do one of two things – reveal character or advance the action.*

Are there any books that backtrack through all the rooms where the character has been, the only seeming purpose being to lengthen up a short story? Of course not! Yet in games it happens all the time. *Prince Of Persia* also had an interesting take on this, where in dull moments the prince would muse about what is happening to him, revealing character and making you care!

5. *Start as close to the end as possible.*

Brilliantly executed in *POP* as well.

6. *Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them – in order that the gamer may see what they are made of.*

Ico is the only game that made me care about the leading characters. When nearing the end, when they got separated on the bridge, I damn near cried. In this respect it is probably better to have a sweet and innocent main character than someone who is obviously in control (and armed to the teeth). They don't need your sympathy.

7. *Write to please just one person. If you open a window and make love to the world, so to speak, your story will get pneumonia.*

Surely *Sudeki* will come to mind. So eager to please everyone, it fails to please at all.

8. *Give gamers as much information as possible, as soon as possible. To heck with suspense. Gamers should have such complete understanding of what is going on, where and why, that they could finish the story themselves, should viruses eat the last megabytes.*

Well... I, for one, do like suspense...

And afterwards he adds, of course, that most great writers tend to break these rules. But then again, most game designers aren't great writers.

René Kneyber

Yep, you can have 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7, but 4 and 5 are open to debate, and we seem to agree on 8.

What does IP stand for? I just can't work it out. (I'm not stupid.)

Tom Wilcox

Internet protocol, idiot proof or intellectual property, but in this magazine it tends to be the latter.

I've just recently returned from a six-month jaunt around the globe, my last stop being Tokyo where I spent a good deal of time searching in vain for a nice crisp copy of **Edge**. I tried shops of all kinds, from general newsagents to specialist videogame merchants (including some in Akihabara that made me feel dirty due to the 'adult games' they stocked). Could it be true that **Edge** isn't actually available in Japan at all, and that it puts the price in yen on the cover just to bolster its ever-so-chic and trendy image? Surely not!

Ben Blease

You could've tried, say, Messe-sanoh Chaos-kan, which is actually in (where else?) Akihabara. As a side note, though, Japanese shops often ignore the official pricing and replace it with their own.

About six months ago I managed to wrangle myself a part-time job in one of the biggest high street videogame stores. I lasted two hours.

Why, you may be asking, did the ass of my new-found employment drop out so soon? Well, I don't know if this is common knowledge, but all the big publishers pay to have their games flicked, caressed and nipple tweaked by soul-stripped employees. Here's a couple of grand – *ShellShock: Nam '67*? Brilliant, mate!

I couldn't do that for money. I know I'm naïve, but come on! Why aren't they promoting good games? Because they're paid to do as they're told.

Why has such a creative, thought-provoking and fun industry slipped down the same money-grabbing slope as movies? Have developers really given it all up?

Steve Masters

We've heard something interesting about UK game retail, but we're not allowed to talk about it. Yet.

I'm fairly certain Edge appraised Neo-Geo Pocket games during the console's brief appearance on UK shelves. Therefore, I find the format's exclusion from Paul Phillips' potentially interesting review scores Excel sheet (Inbox, **E**140) a little surprising, calling into question the research's accuracy. If Mr Phillips can arbitrarily exclude a whole format, how can we be expected to accept that every score from every issue was inputted correctly?

However, I'm sure **Edge**'s readers will be willing to overlook such a dreadful accounting error, provided the mistake is swiftly rectified. Therefore, I respectfully ask Mr Phillips to thoroughly confirm the document's exactness, resubmitting his conclusions along with all applicable formats. Hopefully we will then be able to settle the debate once and for all.

Simon Byron

But we haven't ever reviewed a Neo-Geo Pocket game. Don't you keep old **Edge**s?

I don't know if this is common knowledge, but all the big publishers pay to have their games flicked, caressed and nipple tweaked by soul-stripped game retail employees


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